

POKIE SPOUT
A SOMEWHAT GRAPHIC NOVEL

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Prologue

My best friend turned fifteen on September 11, 2001, which turned out to be a pretty great day for me.

How's that for a first line? Too soon? It wasn't my *first* first line. I've started this story a bunch of times without finding a way in, but I think that's because it wasn't even supposed to *be* a story. Now I'm not sure what it is.

In another life, I'd be composing the introduction to my college thesis on this page. I would carefully avoid the use of adverbs, and never write in the first person. To the extent that I even *had* a voice, it would be impersonal, academic, and if I didn't tell you that my name is Sonja you'd probably just assume I was a man. Because this would be a work of scholarly research, and the world of academia is notoriously sexist.

But all that scholarly research accidentally revealed a story, and the worst thing is I became a *part* of that story, so now I have to figure out how I fit into it. Where does the story start? If I have to be the one to tell it – and Pokie says I do – where does the story start for *me*? I could just begin at the moment where I first heard the name 'Pokie Spout.' Or maybe I go all the way back to that party when I was nine and Caitlyn's brother loaned me those comic books. How much of *me* even matters here?

I had to make a map of my life, to chart my own character development, to find that pivotal moment in time and space that would lead me inevitably to this story. And so:

My best friend turned fifteen on September 11, 2001, which turned out to be a pretty great day for me, but things did get weird for a while after breakfast. My dad was suddenly home from the office, and then the TV came on, and we saw it all for the first time and for the rest of our lives. I remember my parents being scared in a way I'd never witnessed before; I had seen them *worry*, and once when we narrowly missed being broadsided at an intersection I glimpsed what could be described as mortal fear. But this was something else.

My parents wanted to comfort me, so I was obviously meant to be scared too. But when I watched the smoking towers I couldn't quite get there.

Look, I'm not a monster. I had never seen death so abundant or near, and it was awful, but I couldn't produce grief on a matching scale! I just wanted out. So I left the room (which nobody noticed, because I was not on television) and called my best friend.

“Happy Birthday, Conan,” I told her.

“Yeah, real happy,” she muttered. “Pretty sure everybody here has forgotten at this point.”

“Do you want to just go? They're all going to be watching tv all day to see if anything worse happens.”

“I don't want to be home for it if anything worse happens.”

“Meet me at the corner in ten.”

Her name was *technically* Caitlyn, but that name had been ruined by two girls in our class, Caitlyn Beck and Caitlyn Knutson, and there was an even worse one in the grade ahead of us. I had renamed her Conan six years ago, an infinitely better name that only I and her brother used with affection.

She was already standing next to the yellow rosebush when I got there, wearing a skirt and leggings and her denim jacket.

“I can't believe you still have that,” I said. Conan, who knew I was talking about the jacket, smiled and craned her neck a little to cast her eyes over the shoulder. Of course she couldn't *see* the

back of the denim, but it was the most important part.

"I will always have a birthday jacket," she beamed. "All the Caitlyns in the world can't destroy my love for Oh Snap Boys!"

It was a relic from her ninth birthday party, for which her parents had chosen a popular boy-band as the theme. At the time, Oh Snap Boys were available on paper plates, tablecloths, and party hats, not to mention t-shirts for little girls. The heat-transferred photo from such a t-shirt had long ago been separated with scissors, and was now attached to the back of Conan's jacket with safety pins.

"God, what an awful party that was."

"At least *you* got to leave when it was over."

"*And* I didn't have to pretend I liked Oh Snap Boys!"

"Luckily I discovered irony," she said, patting herself on the shoulder.

We were walking now, not with purpose, just to be outside and away from our families. Away from *everyone*, really, since nobody else was out. We talked a little about old birthdays, and a little about the terrorist attacks, but it wasn't coming easily.

"Are we supposed to just sit at home being devastated?" I asked. "Like how am I expected to feel sad for that many people at once? Am I just a selfish bitch for wishing that I didn't have to process all this information?"

Conan shrugged.

"Not as selfish as I am for wishing it didn't happen on my birthday."

When people say 'upstate New York' what do you see? Is it white neighborhoods with big lawns and every single street ends in a cul-de-sac? Because that's what I see and it is totally correct. I grew up there, at the intersection of Wealth and Privilege, and today it was especially quiet. Even the sound of our footsteps seemed to be absorbed, like when there's a lot of snow on the ground.

It wasn't even eleven in the morning when we reached the retail district, but it felt like the world was closing down. The only people on the sidewalks were the ones who were locking up their businesses early.

"Are they all going home?" wondered Conan, watching the last two people leaving a florist.

"What are they going to do there? Sit around being devastated?"

"They probably just want to get out of work."

"Harmlessly taking advantage of an unfolding national tragedy for a day off? Respect." She flexed and grabbed her bicep like a strong, wartime woman. Maybe that's what we would have to be now.

"Didn't the public schools start last week?" I was looking down the road. A lot of lights were still on, but nobody was really moving around. "Imagine sitting there in like, social studies, and they have to make some kind of *announcement*, and then you just stay there in class and wonder what the fuck to do about it."

We walked up the street, our steps ringing like the earth was hollow. Every business with a tv in it was playing the news, and the few people inside were all watching. Conan and I stopped in for sodas at a sandwich shop we liked, where the lady was super quiet and told us to 'be careful out there' when we left.

"How exactly are we supposed to be careful?" asked Conan.

"I guess we watch the skies for runaway planes," I offered. "And then, if we see any, dodge them?"

"Maybe I want to *catch* them," Conan retorted, suddenly miming something with her hands.

"Catch the planes and put them in jars!" Oh, it was an invisible *butterfly net*.

"Lucky there aren't any Godzillas or King Kongs attacking at the same time, you'd have some real competition on your hands."

She laughed, and I glanced around for witnesses. Everything out of my mouth felt like a joke at a funeral, and there was a strong sense that laughter was *especially* inappropriate, but we had arrived at the edge of the park and we seemed to be the only ones here.

“Ugh, this is *stupid*,” Conan yelled suddenly. The buildings across the street from the green area sent back an echo, which normally you'd never notice because of the noise. “Everything feels *weird* but I'm not *scared* so why do I feel like I should be?”

“Because you know that old people are crazy assholes, who go to other countries to knock each others' buildings down in the name of god and money.”

“Buildings full of people,” she said, much more softly now. “My dad was freaked out about the *economy*.”

“Your dad is gross,” I told her. “Mine was going on about Muslims. It's like he suddenly thinks he knows something about them, but he has literally never even said the word before today.”

“Your dad is gross,” said Conan.

“Gross dads club!”

We sat in the swings for a while. Conan and I must have had a plan for her birthday, but I don't remember what it was; I only know that it ended along with those planes in the city. Now we were just *together*, aware of a certain hugeness that we were not equipped for.

“Let's find something to *do*,” I said, by way of breaking our latest silence. “It's your birthday and we are allowed to have fun. Or at least try.” Our options were limited in a town that was shutting down at lunchtime.

“We could go vandalize Caitlin Knutson's house,” she said dreamily. “It's not very far.”

“True, but they're probably all at home.” I stuck my toe in the dirt below the swing, and twisted back and forth on the chains.

“Streaking? We've always talked about trying that. Of course, nobody is around.”

“That makes streaking a lot easier, but way less impressive. It requires witnesses.” I frowned a little. “What if we went back to the sandwich shop and streaked that lady with the hair?”

“Like, one-on-one?”

“Is that too intimate?” I was stifling laughter now, because I liked that idea even more. “What if we streak the sandwich shop, and then when she tells us to stop, I just walk right up to her and stick my fingers in her mouth?”

“Sonja!”

“And I just maintain eye contact with her the entire time.”

“That's disgusting.”

“You know, we *could* rob a store.” I was already saying it out loud before the idea had finished appearing in my head!

“*What?*”

“Well, the town is empty and distracted, cops are probably busy being briefed by the President or euthanizing their families or whatever. We've seen the businesses that are still open, and they're barely staffed at all.”

“Uh huh.” Skeptical.

“So, we could rob them! Like with ski masks! Nobody would ever see it coming.”

“I don't want to go to jail for my birthday, Sonja.”

“We're *juveniles*, and we're obviously traumatized by having gross dads!”

“And the huge terrorist attack?”

“Right!”

Conan wasn't having it, and I was not totally serious – but I was *more* serious than even I

expected. The world was weird today, it was vulnerable and unprepared, and I wanted to do something to the world that I couldn't have done yesterday. But today was my best friend's birthday, and it wasn't *my* day to use as I pleased. So I relented.

That's how I ended up making one of the most important decisions of my life: by trying to avoid emotionally engaging with the disaster, and not freak Conan out too much, I led us to the theater.

"Here's what I'm thinking," I told the birthday girl. "We buy tickets to whatever is playing, then sneak into the first R-rated movie we find. My treat. If there was ever a time the theater-cops aren't paying attention, it's today."

"Taking advantage of a national tragedy to get into an R-rated movie? Respect."

The movie was *Ghost World*, and I became obsessed.

Obsession was nothing new for us. When we were eight, Caitlyn and I read a copy of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* that she took from her older brother Lucas. I can say with some certainty that we did not fully appreciate its nuances, but we were fascinated by the sisters' intricate relationship, and especially by Merricat's instinctive use of magic. At recess, while all the other Caitlyns were talking about how Jake from Oh Snap Boys had broken up with his girlfriend, we were under the trees on the far side of the field, playing 'Merricat and Constance'. We had stolen a pencil with a comical face on top from Caitlyn Beck, and fashioned it into a doll with some cloth and feathers. We took a whistle from the gym, the kind they use to invoke silence and stop kids from doing whatever they're doing, and tied up the doll with the cord. Then we nailed the doll to one of those trees, its magical properties keeping Caitlyn's bullying to a minimum.

Our parents must have been immune to magic, because that year Caitlyn Beck and all the other girls we mocked so defensively were invited to my best friend's ninth birthday party. Back then, the adults all thought it was so damn adorable to have three Caitlyns at one party, and treated them like they had a hive mind. So they subjected *all* of us to the Oh Snap Boys party theme, which the actual birthday girl did not appreciate.

The party unfolded like recess at school, with Caitlyn and I off doing our own thing, our absence ignored. We were playing Merricat and Constance, in a tiny hidden clearing between the side of the house and some huge rhododendrons. The girls were at the top of the sideyard, playing some pre-packaged Oh Snap Boys party game that I never even saw up close.

"I tell you, Merricat," I said to Caitlyn (I let her be Merricat without an argument only because it was her birthday), "there were definitely four books here before. Four books that need to be returned to the library, and today is the day for the library."

"Caitlyn!" a voice called through the bushes, soon accompanied by a furious rustling.

"That's *Merricat*, if you please," she retorted, as Lucas appeared in the little clearing. It was impossible to be seen in here, but quite easy to be heard.

"Well, Merricat is missing Caitlyn's birthday party," her brother said, freeing a branch that had tangled in his blonde hair, "and I was sent to look for her."

"What if I haven't seen her?"

"It's *your* party," he teased. "You must have known they'd miss you eventually."

Lucas was four years older than us, and the first person I ever knew who was Obviously Gay in Retrospect. I hadn't figured that out at nine, I just knew he was much cooler than either our peers or our parents, and he didn't treat us like we were dumb.

"I do believe Uncle Julian is trying to get you to walk into town," I told her, in my most affected Constance voice.

"What you really ought to do is follow me," said Lucas. "If anybody comes to this end of the yard they're going to hear you. But if we sneak in through the front door and go up to my room, I've got

a present for you.”

Caitlyn shrugged. “I don't think you can beat mom and dad. They got me a video with three episodes of the Oh Snap Boys animated series.”

“Oh man,” he laughed. “I promise it's nothing to do with them.”

Caitlyn's house was practically my second home and I've got a ton of great memories there, but being invited into Lucas' room was like entering Narnia. Or the Batcave. My family had no older siblings to idolize, or introduce me to age-inappropriate material that made me feel special, so I was always excited when he included me in his older-brother stuff. Somehow, those memories are the most vivid.

Lucas had a loft bed with a writing desk and a stereo underneath, with his own tv and shelves full of books and videos. He had posters for movies I never heard of anywhere else, like *Female Trouble* and *Zombi 2*, and white boxes made especially for holding comic books. In such a large house, Lucas had found the smallest room and then done his best to crowd it with brightly-colored images and forbidden delights.

When we got inside, I immediately grabbed a plastic toy from the end of his shelf, some kind of lizard man with bulging eyes. Lucas didn't yell at me to put it back; instead he picked up a small parcel from his desk.

“Happy birthday, Caitlyn. You're easily the best Caitlyn here.”

She did not attempt to conceal her excitement. Even I hadn't been permitted to pick her out a present by myself, arriving at the party with the Oh Snap Boys Girlfriend Playset wrapped in green paper. There was little doubt that this would be the only present she was going to like.

“*A Wizard of Earthsea*,” she said, as the wrapping fell. “Is it good? But don't *tell me* about it!”

Lucas laughed.

“I think you're going to like it. I read it when I was a little older than you, but you're smarter than me.”

“Are there dragons?”

“There *are* dragons.”

Caitlyn's love of dragons was no secret.

“And you know what else?” asked Lucas, looking all sly.

“What else?” not even a hint of suspicion, only more excitement.

“If you like it, there are *more books*.”

“Yes!” she pumped a fist triumphantly, and managed to clock the shelf with her arm on the way back down. A few more toys and a pile of comics slid to the floor; I put down the lizard man so I could help pick them up, and *that's* when I saw her.

“Whoa!” I said. “Talk about dragons! Who is this?” But obviously, I already knew the answer, because her name was written in huge red and yellow letters across the top. And she had the same name as me! Red me!

“She's pretty great,” Lucas said with a smile. “Red Sonja is part of the world of Conan the Barbarian. Lots of monsters and sorceresses and stuff!”

“And this dragon in the pit!” On the cover, a sword-wielding redhead was wrapped up in the tongues of a two-headed dragon. She wore bikini armor. There is no *way* my mom would buy me comics like this.

That night, Caitlyn left all of her birthday presents downstairs except for *A Wizard of Earthsea*, which she read with a flashlight under the covers. I went home with a bunch of comic books hidden in my backpack. Lucas loaned me several issues of Red Sonja, Savage Sword of Conan, and Marvel Tales so I could learn more about the warrior woman I might one day become.

When I saw Caitlyn at school the next day, I called her 'Conan' for the first time.

We walked out of the movie theater and I wasn't thinking about the terrorist attacks anymore. Conan wasn't even sad about how they had ruined her birthday.

"That was *amazing*," she said, as we turned down the sidewalk that was somehow even more deserted now.

"Daniel Clowes is our god," I replied.

"I want to do him."

We laughed, and it was okay. The movie had given us permission to laugh. I could see the absurdity of everything leading up to the hijackings, the absurdity of everything that would inevitably come after. I remember having a bit of a shiver, but maybe that's just me *now*.

"This might sound weird," I told her then, "but it kind of feels like I saw myself in a movie for the first time."

"Because a suburban white girl is a completely new concept."

"Please, Conan, I'm trying to have a pivotal moment of self-reflection here."

"Sorry. I don't want to spoil your character development."

"It's just that Enid reminds me of who I *feel like* I am. But she's, like, *braver* than me." Conan was walking in a straight line down the sidewalk, but I was dancing around her. "Does that make sense?"

"Enid is rude, but funny. I don't know how much I would like hanging out with you if you were that mean."

"We're *both* that mean!" I turned and caught her eye, slowed my dance a little. "She's just honest about it instead of only being mean in private, like you and me. Enid is *unabridged*. And I do admire that about her, but it's not what I meant. I was talking about how she knew that she didn't *want* all that stuff she was expected to do. She wasn't afraid to *say* something about it."

"But Enid hates everything. *You* don't, you love lots of things! Weird, nerdy, Seymour kinda things, but *you've* always been passionate. Not like her at all."

Turns out, we were walking back to the park, which was still empty.

"Okay, I'm not saying that I am the *same* as her. I just mean that I feel sort of... *at odds* with my surroundings a lot of the time. Like everybody else seems happy, but I'm kind of trapped in a place that I never asked to be, and there are all these expectations that I just don't *connect with*."

"That's why they invented college. So we can leave!"

"But even *that's* part of it. Want to escape? Go to college! It's probably just like high school, but I can't even *imagine* any other way to avoid becoming my parents."

"I thought you wanted to go to college."

"*Because* I can't imagine anything else! It's so *predetermined*, college is the most obvious path. But what other paths are there? Joining something? The military, the circus, the Peace Corps? I wish I could just *step back* and see my life from another angle. See more possibilities."

We had arrived at the teeter-totters. There was a row of three on a single pivot bar, and we picked one.

"You don't know what you want your life to be," said Conan. "Neither do I, but I don't think that bothers me. At least not yet." Up.

"But what if I never find it because I'm stuck on somebody else's track?" Down.

"You say that like there's something that's *supposed* to happen, and it's the only correct way to be happy," Conan scolded. "That doesn't sound right to me."

"No?"

"No. Destiny and soulmates are good for teaching lessons and telling stories, but I don't think they're real. My dad was happy with Lucas' mom, at least that's what everybody says, and now he's

happy with my mom. He wasn't *wrong* the first time around.”

Up. Down.

“I just want to know that I *can* figure out how to be happy. And that when the time comes, I'll be brave enough to go blindly into the world looking for it, even if I don't know what I'm looking for.”

Conan looked suddenly concerned.

“Well Sonja of *course* you're brave enough. I don't know why you would doubt that. Certainly braver than Enid.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Well if she's so brave then why did she kill herself?”

I dropped my legs and stopped the teeter-totter.

“She did *what*?”

“At the end! I mean, the bus wasn't *literal*. The busline has been closed down.”

“Yeah, I got that. But where did you get the idea that she kills herself?”

“The bus represented death. The old man, Norman, he's outlived his whole family and he just spends every day waiting on a bench at an abandoned bus stop. In the end, the bus finally comes for him. That is Norman's death.”

“I agree!”

“So what's the problem? Enid has basically lost everything. Her best friend Rebecca, and Seymour, she thinks she's losing her dad to Maxine. And when she finally decided she wanted the scholarship, she lost that too. So she gets on that same bus. She doesn't even wait, it comes right away. She *died*.”

Down.

“Oh man.” I sat there with my knees bent, bouncing gently on the rubber tire that functioned as a rest. “Okay. You're right, that makes sense, but I didn't see it that way!”

Conan stared down at me from the other end.

“Then how?”

“The bus represents *moving on*. Norman and Enid had one thing in common, which is that they were both done with that place.” Up. “I think for Norman, *moving on* came in the form of death, because that's what he was ready for. But Enid was just carrying out her plan! To pack up and disappear one day, to go somewhere and start a whole new life. Which she literally *told us* she was going to do!

“The bus is death for Norman, but for Enid it's forward motion.”

“Huh. That makes sense too.” She looked uncertain now. Me too, I bet.

“It works both ways. Or maybe the bus route re-opened. I wonder if there is a right answer.”

There was one obvious place to start. The credits said that *Ghost World* was based on comics by Dan Clowes. Whenever we had a question about comics, we just asked Lucas.

It's strange to think of all the ways my life has changed because of that day, but I guess that's tragically true for a lot of people. I didn't die. I didn't even lose any loved ones, like Caitlyn Knutson did. I just started turning into myself. The events of that day – even the mundane ones – set me up for change that I couldn't have foreseen. They led me to the world of zines, they charted the end of my friendship with Conan, they determined my studies in college, and ultimately led me to punch a complete stranger on a sidewalk in Kansas City! But I'm getting ahead of myself.

The first thing that happened was, Lucas explained zines to me and it blew my mind. His college had suspended classes after the attacks, so he was home for the week.

“Oh yeah, *Ghost World* is great. Man, I should have shown that to you a long a time ago, it's so obvious!”

“So you have the *Ghost World* comic books?”

“Well, I've got a collected edition, but it was actually serialized over the course of a few years, in a comic called *Eightball*.”

Lucas scooted his chair away from the desk and ran his finger along the book shelf. He pulled out a white paperback, and there they were: Enid's pensive eyes in a panel at the top of the cover, Rebecca blowing bubbles in a space of her own. My girls.

I flipped through pages of black and white drawings with pale blue highlights. There were scenes right out of the movie! I didn't even notice that Lucas was still rummaging, until he slipped some comic books into my hand.

“I haven't got *all* the issues of *Eightball*, but you can read these too if you want. Dan Clowes is a terrific artist, but he comes off a little creepy sometimes.”

I was barely listening. Even without taking the time to read what I was looking at, I could tell that this was not like any comic book I had seen before. No costumed heroes, no soldiers, no swords and sandals, no space robots. This was full of sweaty, ugly people, yelling and judging and bothering each other. There was nudity but, like, *weird* nudity that was sexual without being sexy.

“This is something I didn't even know that comic books could *be*,” I whispered.

“Well, check it out, but if you're really interested I have some even weirder stuff. Not *better*, just weirder. I mean, Dan Clowes is basically an underground artist but he has a *publisher*. If you really want to see things get strange, you have to look for the stuff that people publish *themselves*.”

“Where would you even *find* that?”

“May I?” Lucas retrieved the copy of *Ghost World* from my hand and leafed through until he found the scene he wanted, showing the exterior of a shop called Zine-O-Phobia.

“Oh hey, that was in the movie too!”

“And that's what you want to find.”

“Is it like a chain store?”

Lucas chuckled.

“No, Sonja, this one's not a real place, or if it is then it's probably in Chicago. But there are places everywhere that sell zines, and in small towns maybe you find them at like record stores and stuff.”

“And they're comics that people just make themselves?”

“Oh honey.” Lucas occasionally looked at you like he was your grandma. “Zines are so many things. I was really into them for a while.” He was starting to putter around his tiny room again, finding things stashed in files and boxes and shelves. “People publish comics and artwork, for sure. But you've got personal stories, and politics, people write about their jobs, local music, their hobbies. There's no rules in zines.”

“And they just... print them?”

“Yeah, on photocopiers.” He handed me something called *Murder Can Be Fun*, and I started to understand. This was copied on regular paper, then center-stapled and folded into a digest. “People make it all themselves, and then trade them with each other, or sell them through consignments, or whatever.”

My heart was actually starting to beat faster, but I didn't know why. Lucas was brandishing more zines in his hands. *Dishwasher*. Two issues of *Guinea Pig Zero*. Something called *The Inherent Tragedy of Dogs*. They were like books, but secret.

“*Dishwasher* is written by a guy named Pete,” Lucas was saying, “who travels around the country working as a dishwasher in kitchens, cafeterias, restaurants, even an oil rig! Each issue is somewhere different. And *Guinea Pig Zero* is about people who volunteer for paid medical studies.”

“Who would want to read these?” I found myself saying out loud, even as I was desperate to read them myself. “How come Conan hasn't talked about these?”

“She never asked,” he shrugged. “Conan likes the sci-fi stuff, and weird love stories, but this...” he trailed off.

What I didn't understand then is that Lucas, having watched us growing up, was already aware of the fundamental differences between me and Conan. We had always been a duo, and that wasn't going to change right away, but we were destined to grow apart. We were so close that I thought of Conan as an extension of myself, like we were the *same*, instead of really seeing the ways we balanced each other. Lucas saw it. Maybe he even knew that I was about to figure it out.

When I found out I could buy zines at a place called Eye Bomb just a short bus ride away, Conan was happy to go with me – but for maybe the first time ever, I realized that this was *my* thing, not hers.

Eye Bomb was a small space but it was full of zines. Like, *full* of them. Wire racks leaned drunkenly against each other, on a cement floor hidden by several well-trodden rugs of various textures. All of those racks held zines, and so did all the boxes on the shelf that occupied the whole back wall. The zines were not arranged according to any method that I recognized.

“This place rules,” I pronounced. Conan was not convinced.

“How would you ever find something that you were looking for?”

“What are you looking for?”

“I'm pretty sure nothing. I've literally got eight books from the library right now.” Such a Constance.

There was a counter in the back corner, where a girl who didn't seem that much older than us had been reading a magazine. From the doorway behind her, I heard a coffee maker spitting out the last wheezing drops of a fresh pot.

“Did you guys need some help?” she asked. She had glasses and bangs and a hairband, and might have been from *Eightball* herself. Was this the uniform?

“Not really.” I took a few steps inside, covering half the distance between us. “I basically just found out zines existed. Is that sad?”

“Do you *feel* sad about it?” She closed the magazine and fiddled with her coffee cup.

“I feel great about it! But a little sad because I could have already known about them and I've just been wasting my time reading regular books and comics.”

“Wow, dude,” Conan muttered, “way to throw regular books under the bus.”

“It was *your* brother who gave me my first taste of the sweet stuff.” I turned back to the girl with the coffee cup. “He gave me copies of *Dishwasher* and *Eightball* and *East Village Inky*. A bunch of titles.”

“Do you know what you like?” asked coffee girl. “Or do you wanna just poke around?”

“I like comics, and weird comedy, but I don't know what I'm looking for here. Is it possible to read every zine ever made?”

“That's a lot of history to cover. But I can't tell whether you're kidding or not.”

“Me neither!”

“How many zines do you think there *are*?”

I took in the shop's contents with a slow spin. “I'm guessing from your tone that there are a lot more than you've got in here.”

She finally stood to refill her cup from the other side of the doorway.

“Zines are what you call 'ephemera'. There are people who collect them and everything, and archive projects, but you know why people are able to really collect regular comic books? *Circulation*. There are thousands of copies made, of every issue.”

“But not zines.”

“Zines are made by people, not companies. I can tell whatever story I want to tell in a zine, and

then maybe I make a hundred copies of it. Or five hundred. Or maybe I only make twenty.”

“You can always make more, though.”

“Sure, if I want to keep my master copies filed safely away, and constantly live in the past. Not everybody lives like that! Some people make those twenty copies and if you don't find one in time, well it'll be just like that zine never existed at all. And if that zine was made in Idaho or Newfoundland or something, then you're probably never gonna see it.”

“But when *you* make a zine, you always sell some here?”

“Or other places. Or trade with other zinesters.” She gestured to a rack. “Most of these zines have addresses in them, and if you write to them, they write back.”

My head spun. Even though I had only read a handful of zines, I was starting to understand what they represented: voices. All sorts of regular voices, singing out in the wilderness, and being answered.

They write back.

Coffee girl didn't intrude, but answered my questions when I had them. I was running wild with a pocketful of small bills, piling the counter with issues of *Temp Slave*, *Brooklyn!*, and *SemiBold*. *Slow Leek*. *Farm Pulp*. I didn't know where to start or how to stop.

“Maybe you should take it slow,” said Conan. “Romance them a little.”

And it was a romance, though I hardly knew what that meant. Not even literally, much less metaphorically. I understood *obsession*; the zines I'd picked out, by their sheer abundance, declared I had a new one. But obsessions come and go – at least, they always had before.

In that moment, I knew only the excitement of discovery and anticipation. But as I stood in Eye Bomb that day, I threw the switch that diverted my entire life.

The next months would be a journey for me, as zines immediately opened my eyes to ideas that I never had on my own. In family and school I was surrounded by voices that all sang the same way, but *these* voices were new *and I was listening*. It wasn't just me and Conan anymore, I felt like I was learning about my people.

Zines don't come in tins with content labels, so I read a lot of them just to figure out what they were. I was really responding to what the girl at Eye Bomb had called *perzines* (or personal zines). People chronicled the very private stories of their own lives in perzines, then shared them with complete strangers. I was allowed to see the world through their eyes – because my own eyes haven't been that many places, or seen that many things happen.

Of course, simply *being* perzines doesn't make them *good*. Creatively stifled people who are driven to make zines can be bad writers, or confusing narrators, or just *boring*. For every compelling personal story I found, there were a dozen best forgotten. Ephemera.

But for every compelling personal story I found, there were also a *hundred* incomprehensible comic books, incredibly specific product reviews, and histories of things like municipal transportation services or claw machines. And conspiracy theories.

Oh, the conspiracy theories. They didn't stop with flying saucers, government lizard-men, or those newly-minted 9/11 truthers – these are comfortably familiar to anyone who has ever scanned the headlines in a grocery store checkout. No, zines were the dumping grounds for theories too preposterous *even* for tabloids. When I found a conspiracy theory zine I always read it cover to cover with enormous pleasure.

Until I found one that was no pleasure at all.

The zine was called *Meddling* and it didn't have any names or contact information in it. Twelve pages long with no pictures, *Meddling* appeared to be written on a manual typewriter, and the blotchy black letters told me this was a copy of a copy of a copy.

When I got to work the next day, that sedan was already parked outside. It was still there when I left, and waiting for me when I arrived home. Somebody was definitely following. No, not following. They were always there ahead of me. Somebody was watching me. All the time. But why me, a schoolteacher? A nobody.

I was making an inventory of all my actions that might have angered someone. Students I had failed. Disagreements with colleagues or parents. Arguing with that guy at the Chuck when I was trying to rent the youth center. The lady in the SUV I had cut off, anything, but it was all so normal. Who stalks people from dark sedans? The mob, the government? Not the kind of people I'd ever pissed off, or even met. I'm barely politically active. I don't go around making public statements. But everywhere I went, there was that sedan. First it was unsettling. Then I started to feel afraid.

Meddling's surveillance lasted for weeks, a dark green sedan with blacked-out windows predicting his every movement, making no attempt at direct contact or concealment. The tactic seemed designed to psychologically upset the subject, and the tone of the zine suggested it was working. I found myself getting caught up in the story, and then it took a big left turn.

Maybe I just got used to it. The sedan was always there, and nothing ever happened, so I got used to it. And then I was walking up to my house one evening and the car doors flew open and there were these women who looked like tanks!

I thought my heart would stop. Somebody cranked a jack-in-the-box for a month and it had suddenly sprung. I asked:

“What do you want?”

And the driver said:

“We've come to pray the gay away.”

I didn't answer. I didn't understand. Then she spoke again.

“Isn't that what you believe in, sir?”

I asked: “Who are you?”

“Who we are is not important.” (This was the second tank talking).

“What is important, sir, is that your recent statements are at odds with the interests of our employers.”

“What statements did I make?”

“Are you not aware, sir, that conversion therapy has been discredited by the whole psychological establishment?”

Conversion therapy is something I know a lot about, but I still didn't understand what was happening here.

“I know what the doctors say,” I answered. “I also know that they are under tremendous pressure to say it! It's very unpopular to believe that sexual orientation can be changed.”

“And getting more unpopular all the time. That's how we like it.”

I repeated: “Who are you?”

The tank on the passenger side was wearing black glasses and it was impossible to tell if she ever looked at me.

“You told a student who was suffering that he could change. You

recommended an immersive conversion therapy camp. You prayed with him.”

“I work in a private Christian high school. I pray with many of my students!”

“And when you pray, do you kneel?”

“Sometimes.”

That's when I noticed that the driver was holding up a tire iron.

“Perhaps we should practice some aversive conditioning on your kneecaps to discourage you,” she said. “You seem to believe in the techniques.”

She was threatening me! And I was afraid. But I had God on my side and I spoke steadily.

“You have no right to interfere in the private affairs of my students. I counseled a young man who trusted me when he was in pain. He sought my opinion and I gave it. Therapy may not work for everyone, but it worked for me, and if this young man wishes to change then I will support him every step of the way.”

“Yes,” said the passenger, and checked her notebook. “Your file indicates an ongoing ex-gay claim.”

They had a file on me.

“It's the truth, ma'am. You choose the word 'claim' with great care but it doesn't make me a liar.”

“And you choose to be alone, but that doesn't make you heterosexual. Let's not mince words. You've been noticed, sir, by people you would probably prefer not to notice you. If you continue to promote the barbaric practice of conversion therapy, their attention will increase.”

The passenger got back into the car and closed the door. I looked across at the driver, who lowered her black glasses for just a moment.

“Try not to be noticed, sir,” she said.

What started out as a promising tale of mysterious stalking turned into a nutty story about a conversion therapy advocate at a religious school, claiming to be threatened by some kind of gay mafia. What the hell?

Opponents of gay rights have long asserted that the APA caved to gay-lib special interests when they removed homosexuality from the DSM-II. At age sixteen, I would have expressed this fact as *they're mad because being gay doesn't mean you're crazy anymore*. Those same folks love to say that research into conversion therapy is unfairly stigmatized – which I'd have expressed as *they're mad because they want to torture gay kids*. I guess we just have different points of view.

The author of *Meddling* braids these conspiracies together into a personal threat, which I assumed at first reading was propaganda against gay rights advocates. What else could it be? He supports conversion therapy! He claims he's not politically active, and that he doesn't make public statements. But he's writing it in a zine! This guy was either a liar, or laughably unself-aware. He's mad because he was a tortured gay kid, and he wants to keep the cycle going!

Of course I didn't believe it. And I'd have kept not believing it, except there was more.

It wasn't just one account, it was a pattern: days or even weeks of surveillance by a dark sedan, followed by a sudden confrontation. *Meddling* was easy to dismiss. With the second zine, I thought maybe they were a weird urban legend. By the time I found a *third* zine that told an almost identical story, I wasn't so sure. It was absolutely ridiculous, and unfamiliar, but what if it was true?

They had a reputation, and they even had a name: the Homosexual Agenda.

Whenever I read a zine that I thought she would enjoy, I shared it with Conan and most of the time she actually did like them. But she didn't *love* them, and as the months went by it became clear to both of us that my interest wasn't waning. I just wanted to find a way to share this experience with my best friend, but the truth is we were coming at it from two totally different perspectives.

Conan loved *stories*. She loved fantasy stories, and romance, and preferably romance that involved fantasy elements. She loved slice-of-life stories when they were really funny or *really sad*. But she loved *fiction*, and she loved it most when it had dragons. Or spaceships. Or other things that I didn't find in zines all that often.

She *couldn't* love zines the way I did, because I loved their *process*. I loved to hold a folded digest in my hand and know that whatever was inside, it was important enough for this person to write it all out, and draw pictures, to physically reproduce and assemble the document. Their message, whatever it may be, meant enough to them that they became their own editor, publisher, and distributor. I loved to see misspellings. I loved to see where the photocopier reproduced a line at the edge of the tape that was holding the master copy together. This meant so much more to me, as a means of communication, than a personal letter or a page on the internet.

All of this started about seven years ago now, so I have a better understanding of the events than I did at the time. Without seeing it in these terms, I was responding to zines as an artform that democratized the machinery of publication. It was already clear, from the little reading I had done so far, that zinesters came from all walks of life, from homeless punks to middle-aged office workers to girls like me. They all had *access* to the same tools, each of them was able to manufacture and distribute whatever content they wanted. I wasn't sure what all these different people hoped to get out of the experience, but I appreciated that *celebrity* and *wealth* were not topping those lists. In the cul-de-sac, money and fame seemed like the only motivations for *anything*, but in zine world those results would be baffling anomalies.

Traditional publication had gatekeepers, like editors and publishers. To even get on their radar, you need to have the right voice, or tone, to satisfy their expectations. You probably have to be educated, and to have a really *successful* book you need to be pretty and go on talk shows. But zines are the underclass, seizing the means of production. I showed Conan zines by lots of different regular people – struggling with addiction, clashing with their families, coping with autism, dying at unfulfilling jobs. I showed her stories written by hand, and stories in dense prose, and stories told through comics.

He never did feel comfortable enough to tell me his name, but when my volunteer shift had ended he sat up in the cot and touched my sleeve as I was leaving. The man thanked me for taking the time to talk with him earlier, during dinner. He was grateful for the food and the bed but most of all he enjoyed the conversation.

“It's the first time anybody spoke to me all day. Sometimes I feel like the liminal man out there, everybody looking past me. I'd have thought I was invisible except they don't bump into me.”

“You're welcome here,” I told him. “Come in any time you want to be seen, okay?” And I left not knowing if he would. Every single person I meet, I have to wonder if I will ever see them again.

“Don't you feel like you're reading someone else's diary?” she asked, putting down the second issue of *Soup Kitchen*, mostly written by a guy in Washington state.

“That's exactly right,” I said. “Some of these zines feel like I'm having a really personal

conversation.”

She shook her head slightly, eyes wide.

“I don't think I could ever do that. This girl,” she tapped another cover, “is trying to get custody of her baby brother because her mom is basically drinking herself to death. And she is just putting it all out there where anybody in the *world* can read it?”

“Today I found her asleep in the chair. She had pissed herself. Josh was crying in the other room.’ I mean, what about *privacy*?”

“Not everybody is about privacy. That's one of the things that fascinates me, people have so many different ideas of *boundaries*! Some of these zines run for *years*, and they pretty much live their whole lives in public.”

“How old are these?”

We were sitting on the floor of my bedroom with about eighteen zines around us. I couldn't answer for all of them.

“I mean... at least a couple of them are new, I just picked them up at Eye Bomb last week because I liked the earlier issues. Some of these people are making zines *constantly*. But a bunch of these are from the nineties, and some of them go back even further. These issues of *Cometbus* are pretty recent but it's been around for twenty years!”

She had read a *Cometbus* earlier, but it was about places she hadn't been and bands she'd never heard of. I tried to hook her with the mystery of *Meddling*, but Conan did *not* understand the appeal. Clearly she didn't *believe* the story, and said the whole concept was offensive. I bet she would have kept going if there were dragons in it.

My failing attempts to include Conan in my loving embrace of zines finally forced me to think about who I really was, or *am*, and what I was looking for.

Every good memory in my head was of me and Conan, alone together, *separate* from everybody else. I had spent my entire life as an outsider without *fully* noticing because I was never actually alone. Conan and I had often been excluded, but *I* never wanted to be part of those things, and we *always* had something to do instead.

What if it *hadn't* always been the two of us? I'd have been on my own, but Conan probably wouldn't. The others would still have laughed at her a little, because she read more books than was strictly acceptable, and she loved dragons with the passion of a horse girl. But she was polite and she was pretty and her dad had been mayor once, and the more I thought about it, the more I realized that my best friend would have been okay without *me*. She'd have been the quiet one at the edge of some other group, and probably never even know that she was very very boring and totally missing out.

In fact, Conan wouldn't *be* missing out, because she would have all that stuff that we were excluded from *now*. I was the loud one, the one who was always pushing against the tide. That was *my* personality, and it carved a very particular path, but following my path was a *choice* for Conan. I was more interesting than her other options, at least I had been so far.

But now, my instincts all screamed that the world of zines had something to offer me, and I knew it would be a huge mistake not to look for it. I was drawn there, and because it had always been just the two of us on this path, I kept trying to tempt Conan with different zines but I couldn't find the right bait. Because *zines* were not the right bait. Eventually I had to admit to myself that Conan simply wasn't going to follow me this time.

At sixteen I felt like the world was changing incalculably fast, but like I was changing just as much. Even now, it seems like I am *still* processing all the information.

Zines had me thinking a lot about *class*, though I probably couldn't have explained that at the time either. Many of these zinesters were writing *because* they were trying to figure out how they fit

into their own worlds, even their own *bodies*, and their stories were very different from mine. It wasn't the same world for everybody, and zines were changing the way I looked at it.

So were my parents, who now hated Muslims.

Aside from a wedding, I had never even been into a church. Like a lot of parents, mine gave me some sense of morality but allowed Sesame Street to do the heavy lifting, and we were not a religious family. My parents didn't *care* about religion, they never had. So it was especially strange to hear them commenting to each other over the evening news about how Islam was an ideology of hatred and violence, and how their religious leaders instructed them to hate and harm Americans because of our wealth and Christianity.

You don't need *me* to explain that the world is different since Conan's fifteenth birthday. The change is still happening, and many folks don't seem to understand that they are affected. It was chilling to see my parents become hungry for war, but *they* didn't realize they had become *anything*.

The zinesters knew. A big event used to sow fear, misinformation spread like news, a public manipulated and a specific group scapegoated: they recognized the pattern and pointed out how old and familiar it was. In angry, fearful comics and cut-and-pasted diatribes, they decried racial profiling, rising surveillance of immigrants, and suspension of habeas corpus. I could feel how they ached for their minority brothers and sisters, how they feared for their safety with hate crimes on the rise. The war of *ideologies*, that was too big for most people to tackle, but down on the streets, the million tiny battles for human hearts were something that zinesters knew a little about.

So *my* world changed. My parents – and a lot of other parents besides – became grotesque gargoyles perched on the edge of the roof, watching to make sure there weren't any Muslims approaching our cul-de-sac. Conan began to follow the path of least resistance, which wasn't a path I used very often. We never had a falling-out, we just stopped connecting.

Lucas and I still kept in touch, because we would swap lists of cool reading material whenever he was home. Zines weren't really his thing anymore, but we maintained a shared interest in comic books, queer history, and underground movies. Basically, he liked a lot of stuff that *intersected* with zines, and I always loved the feeling of having an older brother. But when I asked him about the Homosexual Agenda, he was a complete blank. Even I hadn't found anything new about them for a while.

My parents may not have noticed that *they* changed, but apparently they noticed that I had, and one afternoon my mom confronted me.

“Are you a goth?” she asked, with that tone she used when she was uncertain if the words she was saying were sexual in nature, or otherwise 'dirty'. “It's okay if you are, it's just that your father and I are trying to understand what you've been going through. These *changes*.”

“Then why isn't he here?”

“You know he's at work.”

She had obviously given this a lot of thought and had some weird script in her head, and it didn't involve my father. Or any knowledge about goths, since I was still heavily into my pencil-skirt Enid phase, and had a huge collection of barrettes.

“You wanna maybe wait for him to get home before you start your intervention?”

“Honey, that's not what this is.” She was hovering around on the far side of the coffee table, pacing the various points of interest in the living room. I put down the zine I was reading and stretched out more comfortably on the couch. “You've just been *withdrawn*, and you never spend time with Caitlyn anymore, but I don't see you making any *new* friends either.”

“Maybe I just don't want to bring my incredible new social group over to the house.”

I'm sure she looked confused, or sad or something, but it's strange: whenever I try to picture my mom she just has a kind of plastic mannequin face. Keep making that expression and it's going to freeze that way!

“We have *always* been a very welcoming household, Sonja.”

“But all my friends are Muslim now because I converted to Islam.”

Her face exploded, and shards of mannequin cut the draperies to ribbon.

“Don't you even *joke* about that!” she stage-whispered.

“I'm not, that's why I've been reading all these pamphlets about how America is a self-righteous superpower whose decadent lifestyle can go suck an egg.” I waved my zine in her face, certain that she had not noticed the title (*Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, not exactly a chilling piece of propaganda). I even sat up and invented a weird little salute; I think it was inspired by Arnold Rimmer from *Red Dwarf*.

“What does that mean?” she yelled. “Is that some Muslim curse?”

“Yes mother. It opens up the psychic doors and invites god into our home. The *Muslim god!*” I fluttered my fingers around in the air in front of me and made theremin noises. “Whoo-oo-oo!”

She shook her head in disapproval.

“I just don't know what's going on with you.”

“I'm seventeen, mom, I'm figuring out who I am. Conan is too. I love her, and I always will, but we aren't who we used to be! The Gross Dads Club has disbanded! She's on student council now, she's got this whole other deal. *I'm* sneaking out on the weekends to go to all-ages punk shows in the city.”

Mother stared at me for several long seconds, wondering if she should pursue *that* line.

“But you're not actually a Muslim, are you?”

I kept trying to figure out who I was, but since I still hadn't come up with a good answer by graduation, I had to go to fucking *college*. Because that's how you escape the suburbs, unless you're creative enough to come up with a better idea, or rich enough to do nothing, and I wasn't. You move away to college, and find a major, and turn what you *love* into what you *do*. Right? But what I loved was reading zines, and thinking about interpersonal relationships. Imagining how a secret organization can exist and operate within a technologically advanced society. Wondering how people can be proudly racist. So I majored in sociology.

The best thing college did for me was teach me the language I needed to express my thoughts. The ability to say things like *I was responding to zines as an artform that democratized the machinery of publication*.

The more I was able to internalize the language of sociology, the greater my peace of mind. I finally felt like I was capable of understanding the complexity of the world through *study*, which for me was the best way to be *in* the world. Discovering the social sciences had filled me with a combination of relief and excitement that was unlike anything I had ever felt – except when I discovered zines. They even helped me understand *why* I loved zines, and their significance to my view of the world. My life was changing, and this new thing I found was going to carve its face on my mountain.

I had reached numerical adulthood in a society that seemed to be circling the drain, and I had always felt so powerless to respond. The zinesters had my admiration just for *reacting* while I was standing still; I never felt creative, but I wanted to *contribute*. Now for the first time, I was a little bit hopeful that someday, through sociology, I might find a way to do some good in the world.

Sociology let me gain a sense of perspective by revealing a larger picture – by teaching me the theories that attempt to describe, predict, and even manipulate human behavior. Some of it is pretty cold-blooded; it doesn't always make me feel good, but it makes me feel *better*.

I had entered college *knowing* that I would incorporate zines into my research; that was pretty much the whole point of *going* to college. But how to do that? So I was always examining my (rather massive and always expanding) collection of zines, looking for potential avenues of study that could justify my ongoing obsession. Professors were not always enthusiastic about the format, but the reality was undeniable: zines were relevant to my major. Jobzines and perzines each had the potential to be funny, depressing, and mundane. They could also be insightful little packets of self-directed research about stratification, and class mobility.

And by researching zines, I could be *constantly* looking for clues about the Homosexual Agenda, a project that was still proving very elusive. Those few zines I found which named them did not provide any means of response. The good folks at Eye Bomb and other zine shops were no help; they hadn't even read *Meddling*, which was still (sadly) my most thoroughly documented source.

Everything I learned about the Homosexual Agenda had been by accident...but always by reading zines. Information hidden in a place most people would never think to check – like a channel nobody is monitoring anymore – but I had no way of looking for that information on purpose. Maybe that's okay; if I found anything useful back then, I'd have been over my head in no time. I still had a lot to learn.

Once I began to consider the power of transgression as a sociological force – which is something you just have to do when you study the social sciences – I learned that zines were *always* transgressive, and often used as a deliberate tool for subversion. I held those words in my mouth and rolled them around for the better part of a semester: *transgression* and *subversion*. From Thomas Paine to queercore and the Riot Grrrls, zines (or their ancestors) had always played a part in marginal cultures' push against the established norms.

But that rebellious spirit was in so *many* zines, not just the obvious ones. I would read and catalog hundreds of perzines in a variety of styles – some that I suspected might be fictional, some so honest that I wished they *were* fictional – and in their pages I met hundreds of rebels. I read amazing works from people who seemed to give one gigantic shout and then disappear, but what became the most valuable to me were the creators who *kept* making zines.

I began to blow on the spark of an idea for my research project, one that would put me in touch with the people who wrote them.

But during spring break in my sophomore year, Lucas disappeared. I was staying at home for a few days when Conan called. We hadn't spoken in ages.

“Oh hey! It's nice to hear your voice. Mom isn't here though, do you need to leave her a message?”

My mom and Conan were working together on the prom planning committee at our old high school, for reasons I could not fathom.

“No, Sonja, I was actually calling to ask you about Lucas.” I braced myself. Was it weird for her, that I had kept being friends with Lucas even after she and I stopped? Was she about to tell me as much?

“What about Lucas?”

“It's just... have you talked to him lately? Like in the last few days?”

“No, but he's been pretty busy with the show. If you need to reach him urgently I'd call the theater.”

There was a bit of silence on the line, enough for me to wonder if I'd misspoken. As far as I knew, Lucas wasn't keeping anything from his family. He had hooked up with a theater company in Boston, and more specifically with the carpenter Dale. Now he was collaborating on set design for their production of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, which I was hoping to see.

“Actually,” she said finally, “Dale called *me*. He hasn't been at the theater in two days.”

“That's weird,” I said, and immediately wished I had sounded less ominous.

“Can you come over?”

So I went over to Conan's house, still so familiar but not my home-away-from-home anymore. Conan, too, looked pretty familiar, except now she was a young woman, who went to restaurants and ate salads with people's moms. She wore a long, tan cardigan, and as I followed her up to Lucas' room I tried to imagine an Oh Snap Boys picture attached to the back with safety pins.

“He was home a couple weeks ago for Dad's birthday,” she said. “I came in here to maybe find a clue or something. But that's stupid, I think.”

Lucas might live like a grownup in Boston, but his childhood bedroom remained a cramped, poster-walled, literature-packed monument to the underground. Even that toy lizard man was still on the shelf, only now I knew it was a Sleestak.

“It's not stupid if you don't know what happened. But Conan –” and I paused for the tiniest moment when the word came out. Was I still allowed this term of endearment? With nobody around to remind her, maybe there was nothing but Caitlyn left. “Is there really a reason to think that anything *happened* to him? Have the police been involved?”

“Dale called the police and let them into Lucas' apartment. He says they didn't find anything suspicious but my parents are driving to Boston right now. I stayed home in case he turns up.”

I rolled out his desk chair and sat down. I swiveled around the tiny room.

“So, Conan, when you came in here before, did you actually *look* for those clues?”

She smiled just a little.

“I didn't Nancy Drew the joint, but I poked around and nothing seemed obvious. It looks pretty much the same in here to me as it did when he moved out.”

“Lucas does have a style,” I said with a grin. “But his style is dictated by his interests. Lucas loves to display the evidence of the things that he enjoys, which is why he has all these movie posters and toys, and faces his favorite books outward so he can see their covers.”

“So what am I missing?”

Without breaking eye contact, I reached to my left and picked up a small stack of zines from his desk.

“These,” I said. “Lucas doesn't even *read* zines anymore. I know that because we've *talked* about it. So why is his desk empty, except for these zines?”

“Um, are you suggesting that he left four zines as a secret message in case he disappeared?”

“Oh my god wouldn't that be amazing?”

“Sonja, this is my *brother* we're talking about.”

I was having a little trouble taking it seriously because it was hard to imagine anything bad happening to Lucas. On the other hand, he had been really excited about *Hedwig* and he seemed super into Dale, so it was weird that he had broken off contact. But I still thought he'd turn up soon, with some wild forehead-smacking story.

He didn't, though. His family was certain something was wrong, but I brought those zines home to take a closer look. Three of them were unfamiliar to me: *Art Slave*, *Philosophy Major*, and *Tipping Point*. The other one was *Meddling*, another copy of that same zine where I had first learned about the Homosexual Agenda. If Lucas had started investigating on his own, and something *had* happened to him, then this was all my fault.

But I was in for a surprise: those other three zines had *nothing to do* with the Homosexual Agenda! I read every word, fully expecting new revelations (and I'll admit to being a little excited about finding them, even if the circumstances were fucked up). What I got was three completely unrelated perzines, which turned out to have one confusing thing in common. I might not even have

noticed, if they weren't grouped together for me.

Art Slave consisted of low-res reproductions of a young woman's paintings, along with written thoughts about her work, her life, and what she hoped to accomplish. I sat on the bed and tried to make out the pictures, wondering if the art slave realized how hard it was to see them. From the urgency in her words though, I think they were more important as evidence – proof she had done the work – than as art for the reader to admire.

Buried in her paragraphs was a thought I didn't understand when I read it:

I only want to create something beautiful, and find a way to prosper without compromise, like the liminal man.

'Liminal' I understood from sociology. I could sympathize with a marginalized person feeling like she existed on the threshold, standing on the edge of perception, or on the verge of becoming her own self. She hadn't written 'a liminal person' or 'a liminal woman' though, she had written 'the liminal man'.

But zines are often released into the world without even being proofread, much less edited for clarity of content. I could have convinced myself I was reading too much into it, except that my reading wasn't over. *Philosophy Major* chronicled the author's extracurricular adventures, largely in retail, while he pursued his futile studies:

So I bade farewell to the toy store and collected my third final paycheck in two years. With every retail job I leave in the dust, I build a clearer picture of my ideal niche, that faceless place into which I can effortlessly disappear. I recognize that the job – any job – will not *matter*; neither what they do, nor what I do in their name, will have any meaning beyond the walls of the business or in any hours not logged by the time clock. And so I will endeavor to find that place where I may be perfectly devoid of meaning, but leave my heart and mind untouched. The liminal man found a door that I have not, so I am bound by the walls that are already standing.

As a student, my preconception of liminality was that it was a transitional state between social strata, or between modes of being within a social structure. Like a teenager fumbling his way to adulthood. Several primitive cultures had versions of a 'liminal period' where young people are ritually stripped of their identities and stations, before elders instruct them in the knowledge they require to assume adult roles within their tribes.

Whatever *Philosophy Major* was describing, it didn't sound like *that*. It intrigued me though, that these two unrelated publications – one from Colorado and one from Vermont, one quite recent and one nearly four years old – might be talking about the same actual person.

The sixteen-year-old author of *Tipping Point* was a girl from Tempe, Arizona. I was immediately drawn in because she was a self-aware adolescent on the brink of growing up, and I know from experience that those people can make some damn fine zines! They're not shy about what they love or hate, are confrontational with their fears, and constantly question everything. This girl wrote *Tipping Point* with a ferocity of purpose that was common to her age group, but a lucidity that was rarer.

Whenever I try to imagine myself as an adult, it looks insane. All I can see is myself dressed as my mother, or even worse, my mother dressed as me.

Some Freaky Friday shit. Why can't I see outside of that? It's like I'm stuck in these narrow channels. Like in a water slide, and you know there's all this stuff around you but all you can see is the curved walls that are guiding you down.

I'm afraid if I don't break down the wall, I'll just end up drowning in a pool. I wish I knew how to stop, to stand my ground like the liminal man or just move *sideways*. I know it's possible to be a new kind of adult, one that's not my mother, or even the opposite.

What the hell was I reading? Where had Lucas found this stuff and what did it mean? None of this, as far as I could tell, had anything to do with the Homosexual Agenda, so was it just a meaningless accident that he had placed these four zines together? Was I assigning value to these zines *only* because Lucas had disappeared?

But: the liminal man. I didn't know what it meant, but that was a real idea being expressed in three disparate zines that seemed to have no other connection. If nothing else, the very notion of liminality was relevant to my studies, which made it worth following up. And if there was *any chance* that I might reach out to the authors of these zines, and learn something that could help Lucas, then I had a responsibility to do so.

The next day, a yellow envelope addressed to me arrived at my parents' home. It bore no return address, but that was Lucas' handwriting on the front. I dropped the rest of the mail and ran the envelope up to what was now the guest room, where I sat on the edge of the bed and held it in my hands. I should call Conan. Right? But I didn't, I had to see *now*.

Inside was a single sheet of paper, folded crosswise. There were staple marks on the crease, because obviously this had once been the cover of a zine. Printed on the front was a large, inverted pink triangle, with the Eye of Providence at the bottom. I'd never seen anything more cryptic and gay.

The rest of the sheet had originally been blank, but on the interior Lucas had written a note in ball-point: *maybe the liminal man can help? Try boring to the punchline*. That was less gay, but maybe even *more* cryptic! My fingertips were sweating on the paper.

Why did he send it *here* instead of just calling me? Lucas must have known he was in trouble.

This was basically the most exciting thing that had ever happened. My friend disappears, I find a clue that might point to the Homosexual Agenda, and then *this* shows up? What did he think the liminal man could do? How do you bore to a punchline? Maybe it would make sense when I figured out who the liminal man was.

I didn't mention the pink triangle note to the police, because I knew they'd never consider it *evidence*. That was my excuse, anyway.

What was *inexcusable* was the fact that I didn't even tell Conan. It wouldn't have helped, and she probably wouldn't have believed me either, but she still deserved to know.

At this point in my research, I was reaching out to a lot of zinesters even during spring break. They were telling me, in their own words, how they got into zine-making and in many cases continued to do it well into adulthood. I had grown increasingly interested in creators who kept nurturing that persistent transgressive streak, over the span of decades. Of course, in the early twenty-first century, there's something a little transgressive about participating in print culture at all, underground or otherwise.

In a world of blogs and message boards, these folks went right on self-publishing like old rock-and-rollers. I thought if I could get to know some of these zinesters, their stories might reveal the patterns of information and behavior I wanted to write about, since I still hadn't realized that a college

thesis is the most useless thing a person could possibly write.

I also hoped these exchanges might reveal some clue about my *own* purpose, since I didn't want to be one of those people who finds her comfort zone and then becomes neutral. In seeking the counsel of zinesters who lived transgressively and spoke truth to power, perhaps I could avoid a comfortable academic job on a middle floor in the ivory tower – no matter how inevitable it might seem. And if we built trust between us, I could then ask them more sensitive questions about things like the Homosexual Agenda.

But when Lucas disappeared, I couldn't shake the feeling that it had something to do with those zines we found on his desk. Suddenly my questions about the Homosexual Agenda were a lot more urgent, and I definitely wanted to know more about this liminal man. So I kept sending those letters and e-mails, but I couldn't afford to wait to make friends. I needed answers, and the first thing I did was contact the zinesters behind *Art Slave*, *Philosophy Major*, and *Tipping Point*.

A lot of my communication with these writers was specifically related to my thesis proposal, which has little value. It was great for *me*, because I love talking to zinesters! But what you need to know *here* is what I learned about the liminal man.

The first to respond to my e-mail was the author of *Tipping Point*, who didn't use her name in the zine, and when she replied just hours later she signed it 'Tipping Point Girl'. She couldn't remember where she first heard the story of the liminal man – a friend of a friend she'd traded zines with through the mail? – but she was excited to be the one to share it with me. She admired the liminal man.

This is what she told me:

He was a kid going to college in Minneapolis. He was under pressure to pick a major, which basically means a career, which is all about forcing him to find a place in a world he didn't love, or understand. What I heard was that he lost his memory, and so he saw the world with fresh eyes, like a baby with adult reasoning skills. Saw the world for what it was because forgetting is like unlearning. He started to build a new identity and he got to start from scratch.

Pretty soon his past caught up with him. Forgetting it doesn't make it go away. I guess he belonged to some secret club that he didn't even remember, and they came after him but he didn't know why. But the thing is, the *why* doesn't matter.

The college, or the career center, or some secret society like the Freemasons, those were all roles that were offered to him by the world he had *rejected*. He didn't like any of those paths so he refused to choose one. He stood his ground. The liminal man made enemies, and his enemies descended upon him, but he shed his identity like a snake and disappeared. Into some kind of secret world, like Wonderland. I guess it's a sort of fairy tale, unless I'm getting it wrong.

The liminal man shows us that we don't need to settle for the roles prepared for us. There's an alternative.

Even a liminal person grows up. You can't help it. But liminality is an opportunity to carve a new path to adulthood. The compromises you make to get there will be different, so the adulthood you achieve will be different too. Normally a kid passing into adulthood has to close off so many doors that the path... it's not like you just look at a path and you choose it! You have to travel, and the path you're traveling on gets narrower and narrower as you shut out

possibilities. But once you are on the path of liminality, it could remain as open as ever. Indefinitely. Because in that state of permanent liminality, you don't have to make the same choices.

Honestly, after reading that, I didn't feel like I had any better idea of who the liminal man was. But I knew a little more about the girl who had told his story. Her explanation was interesting, but things really got going once I heard from Don Chelsea.

I'd begun writing to Don, the editor of a compilation zine called *Imitating Life*, just before all the business with Lucas happened. He's a painter who grew up in New York during the sixties and seventies but now resides in New Mexico. We'd already broken the ice, so when I found those zines in Lucas' room I went ahead and asked him too. Don gave me quite another slant on the liminal man.

He was in art school in California is how I heard it. He was some kind of painter or something, and he was having a nervous breakdown. Couldn't engage with his peers or with the outside either, which if you've spent much time around art students is easy to believe. Then, bam! The kid finds himself in a liminal period.

I've done some studying in my day, you know. I've read *The Ritual Process*. I know what a goddamn liminal period is and *that* is what happened to this guy. He loses everything. But when you lose everything in modern society, the society loses all its expectations of you. Expectation is based on station; if people can't figure out where you belong, they don't know how to make you behave. Liminality freed him from the pressure of engaging with the world in the way *it* demands, and gave him the objectivity to see its structures the way an outsider sees them. More than that though, this kid was smart. Smart enough, at least, to recognize what was going on. *He* knew he was in a liminal period too, but he expected a liminal period to come with a teacher! He didn't have anybody telling him what to do though, so he could have done *anything*. And he *chose* to be the liminal man.

Power structures view artists as potential threats, and the story goes that the liminal man ran afoul of a shadow government who feared his ability to expose them. But the very thing that made him a threat – his liminal nature – also made him untraceable. He vanished, into deeper shadows than the shadow government itself, unwilling to have his future decided by anyone else.

The liminal man is all about refusing to exclude options. It's a point of view you don't often find in young people; not that young people *want* to exclude options, just that they tend to follow their whims without thinking too much about the consequences. You close yourself off to opportunities just by making choices. The liminal man is the opposite of that.

Here's the thing about liminality. It's being on a threshold. Between. Undeclared. He *remained* on that threshold! Most of us only explored the tiniest percent of our youthful dreams before we got old. To achieve any *one* of them takes devotion, so we let the others go. But what if we got *more*?

Time is finite and we live inside of it. The liminal man knew that to take full advantage of liminality, you can't be hindered by your lifespan. You have to be outside of the social structure and also outside of time. Then you can explore all paths and re-emerge with the knowledge to shape the world, and all artists

want to shape the world.

The shadow government never found the liminal man because there was nothing left to find.

A distinctly different take on his story, but this one had a time-travel element that made it even more unlikely than the first one. And just like with *Tipping Point* girl, I got the impression that the story Don *heard* was less important than what he *did* with it. The liminal man had gotten inside his head. He was starting to get into my head, too.

I was casting a wider net than ever before.

Publications that specialize in reviewing zines, such as *Factsheet Five* or *Xerography Debt*, can serve as directories for zine history, if you know what you're looking for. Their back issues are a great resource, and many of the reviews are quite thorough and revealing about the contents of old zines. Unfortunately the older they are, the slimmer the odds that the contact information remains unchanged, but I still pored over them in hopes of finding some reference to either the Homosexual Agenda or the liminal man.

There are also a handful of colleges that maintain zine libraries, often the work of one fiercely devoted student curator. There was even a facility I read about in New Mexico, the Albuquerque Zine Museum, which was said to have an impressive collection in an archive sustained entirely by donations.

My problem was not only that I was looking for something vague, but I also had no *titles*. Nevertheless, I wrote courteous letters to those zine historians; to Davida Gypsy Breier, the editor of *Xerography Debt*; even to the former editors of the now-defunct *Factsheet Five*. I didn't hold out much hope. If they actually bothered to try, the chances that these folks would remember or discover anything useful was still vanishingly small.

I also found a previously unnoticed mention of the liminal man among my own zines, and was encouraged by how quickly I received a reply from the author of *Soup Kitchen*. He told me that he'd first heard the story of the liminal man circulating among the homeless population of Seattle in the late nineties, and basically it went like this:

Once upon a time in Austin, Texas, there was an artist. Some people say he was a filmmaker who fell through the screen into his own movie, and disappeared after the credits. Some say he was a painter who literally painted himself into a corner. I've even heard him called a writer, who wrote himself into his own story, then altered the character little by little until nobody could recognize him, even his best friend.

He *changed*. He became the liminal man, a ghost in your peripheral vision, a face in the wallpaper, a shape of words on a page when you're not quite looking. The liminal man is abstract and mercurial, the antidote to structure. Structures hide things inside.

Free people are not threatened by order, but their freedom can be threatened by structures. Their enemies are jealous of their freedom. They pretend to help by maintaining order, but really they are just propping it up from behind. Digging themselves in. And pretty soon their enemies try to trap them in structures.

When that happens, the free people call upon the liminal man. They summon him with stories, stories that fold inside out, where the middles

become the beginnings and characters cling to paragraphs for fear of falling off the bottom of the page. The liminal man slips in where the fourth wall is broken and erodes the structures with abstraction, and the free people escape. The structures remain because self-righteousness has never required a foundation, but the free people can see they're full of plot holes.

I wasn't sure what to make of this version. Was the liminal man a Tall Tale? A rhetorical device? A half-remembered conversation on mushrooms? In most ways he seemed more idea than man, but for some reason he was specifically from Austin, Texas.

They *all* found different things in his story. Tipping Point Girl found hope that there might be a satisfying path for her, even if she couldn't see it now. Don Chelsea found a fantasy of gaining experience without the cost of time, emerging into his twenties with the wisdom of his fifties (not for nothing, his recent exhibition took themes from his early paintings and reworked them, using new techniques or forced changes in perspective.) And the fellow from the soup kitchen had found a sort of literary superhero, conjured by storytelling, who freed the downtrodden the way you might escape a windowless room that contains only a table and a mirror.

I had no idea what I was onto here, but it was intoxicating. I kept going through the motions, collecting data from zinesters and crafting a thesis proposal with my advisers, but the only part I really cared about was the liminal man. In fact, I was *so* distracted by him that I practically forgot about the Homosexual Agenda. Then it was May of 2007, a whole year after Lucas disappeared, and they were back on my radar with a vengeance.

I remember the date clearly because it was the same day that Mount Rushmore was famously vandalized, which dominated the news cycle for most of the afternoon. I was listening to the radio and typing up some notes when my phone rang.

“Sonja? My name's Melissa. It's... I'm Tipping Point Girl.”

“Oh damn! What's going on?” I'd never heard the voice before, but her nervousness was plain.

“A while back you told me about a zine cover. With a pink triangle and an eye?”

“That's right. The cover I have was torn off and mailed to me.”

She was quiet for a moment.

“I know somebody who has a copy.”

“For real? Can I get it?”

“Listen, Sonja, I don't want to freak you out or anything, but this guy is, well, freaking out.”

“I don't understand.”

“He won't tell me where he found it, but he says that he's been followed ever since he read it. I don't even know him – we're just zine friends, we trade zines and letters and e-mails, that's all. I can tell he's scared though, he reached out to me because he wants my help, but he also won't *let* me help.”

“Have *you* seen the zine, Melissa?”

“No. He doesn't live here, and I have school for another month. I offered to come anyway, but he says that if I read the zine I'll just be in danger.” She took a deep, audible breath. “But he will let you read it.”

“He *will*?”

“I told him I knew somebody who was looking for that zine. That you had seen the cover before, and that finding the zine might be a way for you to help a friend who's in trouble. That's all true, right?”

“Yes! Every word.”

“So he won't let you have it, but he will let you read it. You'll need to go meet him.”

“Where is he?”

“Kansas City.”

Now it was my turn to take a breath. Kansas City.

I looked around my apartment. Banker boxes full of zines stacked everywhere. Heaps of them on my desk all around me. On the computer, my analysis-in-progress of zines as a response to alienation. I was in the home stretch of my junior year of college. Finals were just around the corner, then a summer of getting my research in order before tucking in to my all-consuming thesis project. It was everything I'd been working toward, before the liminal man. And now this.

“I can be in Kansas City in three days,” I said. I started packing the car.

Melissa arranged everything. Three days later at a Kansas City hangout called Second Story Basement, I read a zine that unraveled me. The guy I was there to meet, a skater kid called Gary, was looking pretty unraveled already. He didn't know or trust me, and I wasn't even sure he would show up.

But he did, and what he brought with him was amazing. My heart lurched when I saw the two-color screen print of the pink triangle with the Eye of Providence, because it was exactly the same as the one in my car. Except this one had an actual zine inside!

It was the proof that *someone* had walked this path before me, collecting stories and trying to piece them together. This was everything *they* could learn about the Homosexual Agenda, and it was a hell of a lot more than I found on my own.

There were many testimonials about stalking. One victim was a gay man who had caused a scene when he rejected another man's advances in a local bar in 1995. Another had published a poem in 1998 about a crush she had on a girl when she was in middle school, only to find herself threatened by the Homosexual Agenda three years later. One man was menaced in 1997 after complaining, in a letter to the editor, that television only featured gays as guests on exploitative talk shows but kept them out of scripted programming. All of them saw the sedan and were eventually confronted.

That sort of thing was already familiar to me, but the author of this pink triangle zine revealed so much more, in spite of a frustrating reluctance to cite any sources.

He claimed that the Homosexual Agenda was a secret organization that had formed in the aftermath of the Stonewall riots. Someone recognized that their moment had come, that gay rights was poised to become part of the national conversation, and whoever was leading that conversation would have a lot of power.

They were the secret architects of the first gay pride parade, Christopher Street Liberation Day in 1970, laying the foundation for how the cause would be perceived by the media. While most participants simply celebrated their love and vocalized their desire for equal rights that day, the Homosexual Agenda was busy establishing the *format* of the gay rights movement. According to this zine, they had ruled from the shadows ever since.

But what it described was more than just the creepy enforcers I had read about so far. The Homosexual Agenda had power, *real* power as I understood it through the social sciences. By controlling the media, the Homosexual Agenda had been selling gays to America for decades. It was suggested that an organization powerful enough to effect sweeping changes, with influence in politics and corporations, had instead *chosen* to alter the narrative incrementally, allowing gays into the media landscape only where and how they saw fit. Apparently, every psychotic gay transvestite and murderous lesbian hit squad on television was given a stamp of approval by the Homosexual Agenda, which I couldn't understand at all. But it got worse.

Despite their *ability* to push through comprehensive gay rights measures, the Homosexual Agenda was accused of stifling legislation as often as supporting it. Their involvement had been noted in the Briggs Initiative in 1978, and there were rumors that Dan White had been manipulated by

members of the Homosexual Agenda into becoming a patsy. Even I had trouble believing *that*, and I was feeling pretty credulous at the moment.

They took credit for some positive changes: removing homosexuality from the APA list of mental disorders (it *was* a conspiracy!), changing GRID to AIDS in 1982, and influencing the formation of ACT UP in 1987. But supposedly they had also kept the Reagan administration from ever addressing the AIDS crisis the whole time he was in office, for reasons that had never been uncovered.

The Homosexual Agenda seemed to *contain* the gay rights movement, but was itself concerned only with the *appearance* of pursuing equality. As the gay rights movement grew, the Agenda protected its own interests, ensuring that the infrastructure of liberation remained a manageable shape and size. And innocent people suffered, because they didn't know that this particular enemy existed.

This zine with the pink triangle on the cover was the story of a secret organization that used disenfranchisement and alienation as currency, reaching its tendrils into the corridors of power, while hiding behind the human shield of a marginalized group that the larger society viewed as disposable.

I didn't believe it (yes I did.) Why *should* I believe it? I knew it was crazy. It was a crazy story that I found reading zines that were self-published *anonymously*. And the only confirmation came from sources that were *exactly* the same. This wasn't even a perzine, it was just another conspiracy theory and it would be stupid to believe it. And I had to go back to school.

But I was sitting in a coffee shop in Kansas City, with a pile of zines on my table and a skater named Gary Plywood bouncing his leg nervously across from me, and I actually felt the world change. Everything in the whole world fell over flat on its face, just for a second, and then we were all sitting at our tables again. But I knew it had happened. I closed the zine and couldn't unread it.

Gary wouldn't tell me where he had found it, but it was clear in the furtive, reverent way he handled the zine that he believed its contents. He didn't like having the pink triangle zine out on the table where it could be seen.

“Why did you let me read this?”

“Partly because Melissa said that you might be able to help someone. But mostly because you already know it's true,” he said. “So you should be prepared.”

“Prepared? For what?”

“That depends. What are you planning to do?”

He was whispering, like we were accomplices.

“Look, I don't have a plan,” I told him. “I'm not investigating them intentionally, and I wouldn't know what to do with this even if I could prove it. I'm not a reporter, I'm just a college student.”

“A reporter wouldn't be able to do anything with it,” said Gary. “*They* decide what gets reported. Somebody... *somebody* can act, but not because they can *prove* it. Proving it won't undo what has been done. Exposing them isn't the solution.”

“Then what is?”

“I don't know. I can't see it, it's too big and they've been there too long. They aren't just making decisions and changing outcomes, right? Because it's been going on for decades...”

“No, you're right,” I suddenly understood his point. “By controlling the stories people see in the media, over the course of thirty years the cultural attitude has evolved the way they *wanted* it to. If they're overseeing the gay rights movement, then all of it – the whole political and social structure that the movement is based on – was built to their specifications! Even if the Homosexual Agenda suddenly disappeared, their influence is already in the foundations. The social structures they created would continue to influence everyone's behavior even after they were gone!”

Was this even possible? The comfort I'd once taken in the social sciences suddenly drained away, and I was left asking the same questions that haunt all little girls from the suburbs: does a society determine the shape of its own structures, or do those structures determine the shape of the society? Are

the structures built by the conscious agency of individuals, or is the agency of individuals limited and determined by the shape of the social structures within which they move? Once a maze has been constructed, do the rats who live in it ever consider chewing through the walls?

I didn't know much about Gary Plywood, though I would have bet money that wasn't his real name. But he was bright, and when it came to fear I knew he wasn't faking. I took a chance and put my hand on top of his.

"You've seen them, haven't you?"

"There's a car," he said. "A dark sedan. But not today. I don't think they want you to believe me."

"Just now, you said that 'somebody' could act." Gary quickly looked down and pulled back his hand, but not all the way. "Who did you mean?"

"Nobody," he said, without looking at me. "Nobody particular."

I didn't quite believe that, but I didn't press. I just thanked him for what he had shown me.

Gary put the pink triangle zine back into its well-worn envelope and slipped it into his shoulder bag before we left. On the sidewalk, I changed my mind and decided to press after all.

"I need to ask," I added, "have you ever heard of a guy called –"

But I was watching his expression change as he looked past my shoulder, and I never finished the question.

"Don't turn around," said Gary.

"What is it?"

"The sedan, the one I thought was leaving me alone today. It's here."

"Are you sure? What should we do?"

"Let's just go. We should split up."

"Wait. No. I want to walk past the car with you."

He protested, but what was he going to do to stop me? So we turned and started walking to the end of the block. We had a few yards in which to study it and the sedan was an ordinary car, with smoked windows and green so dark it was almost black. But Gary Plywood was palpably afraid of it.

We were right alongside and I was trying not to look when suddenly the doors opened. I froze, and Gary stumbled back. There was a woman right next to me now, all suit and sunglasses.

"Mr. Kirk!" she demanded. "Or should I call you Mr. Plywood?"

I wish I had a better explanation for what happened next. I punched her! I balled up my fist and somehow the luckiest knuckles in the world connected just in front of her left temple. Her sunglasses broke. She also fell backwards against the car and appeared stunned. I know *I* was.

I turned to Gary, who looked just as surprised as me.

"Holy shit," he said. The driver, totally unpunched, was out of the car and moving our way, and suddenly I was aware of everybody else on the sidewalk.

"We need to go," I said, and grabbed his arm. My car was parked around the corner, and I got us both lost in another part of town as quickly as I could.

"Gary," I said, once we were moving, "I'm so sorry. I don't know why I did that!"

"We probably shouldn't hang out anymore."

For some reason it felt important to me that Gary not think this was my normal behavior.

"I have literally *never* hit anyone before!"

"So you start *now*?" Flannel bunched around his neck and shoulders as he sank down my seat. "What are these people going to do to me?"

"Maybe that zine got me riled up," I was saying, mostly to myself. As explanations go it was true enough, but pretty weak. We tried to talk a little more, or I did anyway, but all the words felt like they were just interrupting the shocked silence. I dropped him off outside an apartment building, which

he said was home but I had my doubts.

I was a long way from home. I was out of my comfort zone. A secret society had built social structures with the explicit aim of manipulating human behavior, and my hand hurt from punching one of them. Suddenly, I didn't know whose world I was living in, or who else might be hiding in it. I wasn't even sure who *I* was now!

I drove around Kansas City for another hour before I checked into a motel, where I paid for two nights in case I wanted to lay low the entire next day. When I got inside and threw my stuff on the bed, I found a well-worn envelope in my backpack. Gary had slipped me the pink triangle zine at some point during our escape. Maybe that meant he trusted me. Or hated me. I needed to tell Melissa.

When I awoke I was sweaty and gasping. The sun wasn't up, and my hand throbbed. I thought:
What have I done?

She hadn't identified herself. All she had said was Gary's name, and I just assumed that meant she was part of the Homosexual Agenda. Apparently I had lost my damn mind! She could have been a bill collector, or serving Gary with a summons, or any number of far more likely things than 'gay enforcer'! And I just assaulted her. But it was *exactly* what all those stories had described, and Gary sure seemed to believe that's who they were. Of course, *Gary* was also a complete stranger and could be totally delusional as far as I knew!

I lay in the bed, my eyes still closed.

There were two possibilities. First, maybe she was *not* who I thought she was. In that case, I'd committed an unprovoked crime and had maybe become psychologically unbalanced. But I hadn't knocked the lady out, and nobody hurt the driver, so why did neither of them chase me or call the police?

No, damn it, the *second* possibility might be crazier but it made more sense! The sedan, the woman, the sudden confrontation: it matched everything I had read *and* explained why they didn't press charges. The stiff red hand laying across my chest was a reminder that the Homosexual Agenda actually existed. Maybe the pink triangle zine was right about them, or maybe they were something else, but they had *been there*.

I fell back asleep.

When I woke again, the sun had come up but the room was still dark behind heavy curtains. Not so dark, though, that I couldn't see a figure sitting in the club chair beside the window.

"Holy shit!" I sat up, and the person in the chair turned on a lamp. He was about my age with blonde hair and a dark, expensive suit, casually holding a few of my zines in his hand. He was wearing sunglasses, obviously for effect, and I probably should have been afraid but I *wasn't*. There was a recorder on the nightstand, and I started it before I turned on my own lamp.

"Sonja," he said. "We need to talk."

In spite of everything that had come before, *this* is where things got weird.

"You could have called the room," I told him, as I sat up. "Or at least knocked."

"I prefer to make my own way." He stood, took a step toward me. "You've been awfully inquisitive."

"Are you the liminal man?"

That stopped him in his tracks, but not (I would soon realize) for the reason I thought. Even with sunglasses on he appeared surprised, turned his head a little.

"Why do you know that name?"

"Lots of people do. Your story is spreading but I don't think people are getting it right."

"Not my story," the blonde man said. "I've never even met him."

“But you know who he is?”

“I have heard the name,” he said. “That's not why I'm here.”

“You said I had been inquisitive.”

“On multiple subjects, apparently, but the liminal man isn't the one that interests me at the moment.”

Sometimes I can be a little slow, like I had been with Lucas. I took a moment to notice his impeccable tailoring, his perfect hair, the alabaster glimpse of dainty wrist below his black leather gloves.

“Oh my god, you're the Homosexual Agenda!”

Could he hear all the joy and relief in my voice? I wasn't crazy! A tiny smile barked onto his face for just a moment before he returned to stone.

“I am *with* the Homosexual Agenda, Sonja, and you have been doing quite a lot of reconnaissance on the organization. And you punched Jolene. I would like to know why.”

“I'm not sure why.”

He seemed to be studying my face, but it was hard to tell with the sunglasses on. Now that I knew who he was, I was trying not to think about the fact that the pink triangle zine was in my backpack next to the bed, right on top, first thing you'd see if you peeked. The zipper wasn't even closed!

“You were already digging into our past, before your encounter yesterday.”

“There wasn't much to go on,” I said, positioning myself on the edge of the bed, where I sat in as nonchalant a manner as I could muster, which wasn't very. “I was just trying to see if the stories were true.” As casually as possible, I tipped the backpack under the bed with my leg.

“But *why*?”

“Because if they *are* true, then it means that a powerful group is making decisions that affect millions of people without their consent! They do it secretly and they don't explain their motives and if it's real then I want to know about it.”

“Why, Sonja? Why do *you* want to know?”

“Because people – ”

“Not *people*. You.” He returned to the club chair. “Why do *you* want to know?”

I thought he was just being annoying with his repetition, maybe trying to keep me off-balance. But if he really wanted the truth, I didn't mind telling him:

“As a culture, we make a lot of mistakes. But I believe, or I want to believe, that our society also allows for many voices to call out, to draw our attention to those mistakes, and rally a collective will to fix them. Because of this, I believed that our culture, in spite of its missteps, was on a path toward enlightenment.

“But what if that isn't true, and has never been true, at least not in my lifetime? What if it has always been an illusion? Stonewall was one of those rallies. A spontaneous act of outrage, of frustration, of wrongs aching to be righted. It might have had fast and far-reaching consequences if all of those voices had been allowed to speak.

“I want to know if the Homosexual Agenda seized control of the narrative and the structure that contained it. Oppressed people demanding equality sometimes actually receive it, and that leads to large-scale changes that will probably be beyond one group's ability to control. What if *control* is their only real goal? That would give the Homosexual Agenda a strong motivation to *prevent*, or at least slow down, the equality that would be in the public's best interest. If that is really what's happening, it scares me to death!”

“Are you a homosexual?”

“No, but I hardly think that matters.”

“If your concern is with equal rights then it matters if you already have those rights.”

I chose not to get sidetracked with the obvious retort. Instead I said:

“If the Homosexual Agenda manipulates the media, then they aren't affecting only homosexuals, they are affecting everyone who consumes the media. They own the entire gay rights movement, not just the flags and slogans but even its *perception*. They can do a lot of damage, and from the stories I've heard you guys have *really* questionable motives.”

“How did you know about the flags?”

“What?”

“Never mind. Sonja, you are a sociologist. If an oppressed group of people is seeking to have equality *granted* to them by a society that despises them, don't you think it might be valuable to control the machinery of their own liberation?”

“Of course. If that's actually what the machinery is used for.”

“And you don't think it is.”

“Structure versus agency,” I replied. “It's a classic debate. If you build a structure, most people will naturally follow its plan. Oppressors recognize those structures as the primary force for control. Social structure determines and limits human action, and most of them don't even notice. But oppressors consider themselves *above* structure. For them, *agency* is prime. And they think that sets them apart from – sets them *above* – other people.

“They have agency, and they *keep* that agency by shaping the structures. They build the structure, and the people follow its plan.”

I looked hard at the dark lenses where his eyes would have been.

“I think that if an organization has this much power,” I said carefully, “and they wanted homosexuals to have equal rights, they would have them already.”

All of this was a truthful answer to his question. *That* was why I wanted to know about the Homosexual Agenda. But it's not why I punched Jolene. I punched her because I was more offended than I had ever been.

The Homosexual Agenda had taken the social science that I loved, the one thing that had ever brought me peace of mind, and turned it against their own people. The tools that I valued for helping me to understand the world, were the same tools they used to do harm. I had just read the pink triangle zine and begun to understand exactly what they'd done, and when I saw her outside it all became too real. I'm not proud of it, but that's why I hit her.

“Who is the liminal man?” he asked.

“I thought you knew.”

“I've heard the name,” he said again.

“Well, I don't know exactly. He's a kind of urban legend that only zinesters seem to know about.”

“The people who publish *these* things?”

“Yeah.”

“And these zines, that's how you learned about the Homosexual Agenda too?”

“Yes.” Don't look at the backpack!

He was silent for a moment. A question suddenly popped into my head.

“Why did you come here?”

“Because you've been snooping around and you punched Jolene.”

“No, that's not it. I mean yeah, that's how you found me, but there's something else going on. What are you looking for?”

“I think that's enough for now. Thank you for your time,” he said, and got to his feet. For a moment, at the door, he seemed to hesitate, but then he left my room without saying anything else.

I was rattled. First because I woke up with a stranger in my room, then because he irrefutably confirmed the existence of the Homosexual Agenda. But as I dressed and paced, and thumbed through the pink triangle zine without actually reading it, I realized the other thing that was bothering me: he broke the pattern. Where was the intimidation? The unsettling surveillance that goes on for ages? No, he had jumped right to the confrontation, but even *that* had been more like a philosophical discussion than a threat. Something was wrong.

The morning was bright as hell, and the ice machine was around the side of the building, so I put on sunglasses and moved quickly. I filled a small bag of ice for my hand and retreated to my room, where I intended to fret for most of the day.

There was a parcel wrapped in brown paper sitting in the chair.

Two minutes. I hadn't been gone more than two minutes and somebody had been in my room again.

I placed the parcel in my lap, took a deep breath, and unwrapped it. I don't know what I thought it might be, but this was unexpected.

Zines were the only place that I had found the liminal man, but reading zines had never told me who he *was*. His story just wasn't there, but these zinesters, whatever they were – ambitious artists, crackpots with typewriters, kids on the edge – he was known to them. The liminal man was important to them, and as I searched I had assured myself that someone, somewhere was going to tell his story.

Turns out that somebody already had, and that story was now in my lap. It was a manuscript. A manuscript called *The Liminal Man*.

By Pokie Spout.