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*To my editors, Athena and Olive*













## TIPTON, IOWA, 7 YEARS AFTER CONTAGION

I'm lugging a bucket of grain to feed the sows with two hands to keep the weight of it, hung from that thin wire, from biting into my somehow never-callousing fingers, when Keith comes up behind me, and hoists it away from me with one hand. He holds it up, still with one hand, and tsks at me. "Looks like you need some help there, Little Lady."

He's got the macho bravado of all the T-slabs, complete with the aggression and rages—plus he's six-foot-five if he's an inch. Our relative heights place my line of vision at his chest, so I'm able to observe from up close how he's wearing a pair of

old Carhart coveralls unbuttoned down the front to show off his hairy bitch tits. He's so proud of them that even out here in the country he shows them off, a bit of conspicuous consumption that even the most isolated farmers can read: *I'm so flush with testosterone that I overinject. How about that, you low-count ration-dependent weaklings?* I'm just grateful he doesn't wear shirts with the chest cut-outs, a recent fashion among the slabs.

In business, the buyer is supposed to always be right, but Keith takes as his due the notion that he's in charge, and I'm the little follower. He doesn't have any idea that before the contagion spread, I was already trans, already injecting estrogen. He just figures I'm another auntie-boy, one of those males who couldn't afford testosterone during the Rift Wars and who began to inject poor-quality estrogen. Hence all the "little lady" stuff, which most folks would understand as a jibe about how auntie-boys were said to have survived the war. I let him assume that. I need that black market estrogen he harvests from those ugly mutant pigs.

With estrogen tightly rationed and regulated, the provisional government allots the good estrogen for women of promising fertility. An older woman

would have to have a relative in government, or have the money for a really well-placed bribe to get on the ration list. A trans woman? People still believe that we Antediluvian trans women started the contagion. Even if we came out of hiding, there's no bribe large enough to get us estrogen.

Keith is doing curls with the bucket of feed, making the veins in his forearm pop like creeping vines. I wait for him to finish, but now the game is to show that his strength can outlast my patience. I gesture to the sows. "You want to feed the pigs yourself? Go right ahead."

He hands the bucket back to me. "Nah, I like seeing you prance and scurry away from them." Feeding the pigs means getting in the pen and scattering the grain before one of the freakish monsters knocks me over and gets a bucket of feed to herself.

"Fuck you, Keith."

"Ooh, sweetheart. You just let me know when and where."

As part of our deal, I'm learning about pig-husbandry from Keith, so that Lexi and I can steal a few piglets and raise them for our own—unfortunately, I hate the creatures, both Keith and the pigs. Keith for obvious reasons, and the pigs

because they're genetically modified to over-produce bio-identical hormones to humans. Industrial-grade hormones in my body make me a crazy bitch, and I'm not 600 pounds with inch-long razors for teeth. A month ago, I broke a toe kicking one of those porcine tanks in the snout. She wasn't slowed for a second. Just barreled me over and bit a two-inch gash into my thigh when I didn't immediately dump the feed bucket for her gustatory delight. Another scar.

I manage okay this time—even get a short retaliatory kick in on the black-and-pink one as I hop the fence out of the pen. The monster doesn't notice, but Keith, leaning against the door frame at the edge of the barn, does.

"Is it your time of the month or something?" he calls out. As if. He shakes his head. "You're bitchier than my pigs. Save some supply for the real girls, huh?" He assumes I'm just a typical dealer, selling to women desperate for fertility and pregnancy. That's what most of his stock goes for. The population is aging, dwindling.

I pick a strand of muddy straw from my pants as I walk over to him. "No periods yet. Are you holding out on the good stuff, Keith?"

He pulls from his pocket a little baggie with ten 5ml glass vials inside. "This here's pure. Enough to make a baby factory run for a month. Probably even make an auntie-boy like you preggo."

I hold out my hand, but he doesn't move to give me the vials sitting in his fat paw. Just leers at me. "Any your girls need a stud, you know where to find me."

"Sure, Keith." He says this every time I re-up, but for once, I indulge a moment contemplating the image of Keith trying to seduce and mount Lexi. It's a funny, satisfying picture. He'd have just enough time, before she ended his stupid existence, to raise those white-blond eyebrows in surprise at what he found.

## SEATTLE, CONTAGION DAY

Lexi pulls up the hem of her skirt, showing off her thigh, more tattooed than when I last saw it. “See that?” she asks. I’m not thrilled with the vibe. Lexi has to know showing off her thighs won’t have the desired effect on me.

“See what?” I ask.

“Here,” Lexi says, and points. Above a tattoo of a ship is another simpler tattoo, maybe a stick and poke. It reads t4t.

“t4t?”

“Yeah,” Lexi says, “like we used to be. Or maybe you never really were.”

“Lexi, can we not do this again?”

She lets her skirt drop, covering up the tattoo. “Fine. Anyway, now it’s different. I’m t4t for you in the abstract. Trans girls loving trans girls. And you’re trans so you’re included.”

My annoyance flares: Lexi, deigning to include me in whatever she’s up to now. But she’s half-right, Lexi’s somehow ended up maven of the Seattle trans girl scene and I want to be included. The year during

which she and I weren't speaking was a lonely one.

"So what do I get to be a part of?"

"The future," answers Lexi, "In the future, everyone will be trans."

I resist an urge to roll my eyes. Often, Lexi sounds like a sophomore who's just enrolled in a critical theory course. I can't tell if the other girls listen to her despite her super-basic analysis or because of it. Everything with her and her clique is gender theory, or else it's transphobia, abusers, anger, and Down With Cis!

I guess I didn't fully resist that eye-roll, because she pulls back and says, "Oh, I don't mean that everyone will be trans in some squishy philosophical way. I mean that we're all gonna be on hormones. Even the cis." She reconsiders the wording of her statement, and then, revises, "*Especially* the cissies." She's got a plastic canister next to her, that she'd fetched a few minutes before. She picks up the canister and taps on it ceremoniously. "You'll see. When I say the future, I don't mean some distant era. I mean in about six months."

"Lexi." Raleen says. "Don't, please, just put it back."

Her voice is nervous. As always, I've forgotten about Raleen, because she barely speaks, and even when she does, she hardly makes sense, and somehow even though she stands a half foot taller than me, in the unobtrusive way she carries herself, she appears to take up less space than a child, receding into the couch that is her temporary home until I forget about her.

We're sitting in the living room of the shared house Lexi lives in, a falling down Victorian on the edge of the Capitol Hill neighborhood in Seattle. Even with the siding falling off, Lexi and her roommates shouldn't be able to afford it, except that it belongs to the uncle of one of the girls, who rents it cheaply while he waits for a developer to come along and offer the right price. To atone for accepting a cis dude's charity, Lexi offers the couches downstairs to any passing trans woman without a steady place to sleep. For the past few months, it's been Raleen, who's apparently homeless, despite her enrollment as a NSF-funded graduate student in molecular biology at the University of Washington. She began transition halfway through her dissertation research, and her faculty mentor lost interest in advising and collaborating with her. Her parents,



back in Columbia, have no idea about her transition, and it seems to be in order to draw out their ignorance, as much as for herself that she shows up at the lab from time to time and putters around, while everyone waits for the last of her NSF funding to run out. She's been on 2c-b half the times I've seen her, which Lexi says Raleen has synthesized herself. It's some hallucinogen that is apparently easier to produce than LSD, at least with the chemicals Raleen has access to at her lab. Maybe she's on it today, maybe that's why she's all nervous? Or maybe she's just a weirdo, who knows.

“Raleen, we talked about this,” snaps Lexi.

“About what?” I ask. And suddenly I am the one barely there. Lexi and Raleen ignore me, playing out some wordless argument. From my angle, Lexi is outlined against the front window, made of five vertical panes of glass, in each of which the girls in the house have hung gauzy transparent fabric in the colors pink, blue, and white, to make the window into a trans flag. They take a lot of selfies in front of it, not just for political reasons, but because the light filters softly and flatteringly through the fabric. Silhouetted in front of the sunlit flag, Lexi looks suddenly striking: propagandistic

and imposing.

Raleen loses the staring contest. “Just—oh, nevermind,” she mutters, but watches Lexi intently. Sometimes it upsets me the way Lexi’s made Raleen her puppy.

Lexi shifts to face me. She’s playing hot potato with herself, passing the canister from one hand to another. “Remember that project Raleen talked about a while back? How she’d been messing around with that pig vaccine?”

About a month or so before, Raleen had been as talkative as I’d ever seen her. Going on about some Australian vaccine used to castrate pigs—or technically, it wasn’t castration—the vaccine created an auto-immune response that prevented boars from ever being able to process the precursors to testosterone, which otherwise would cause the “boar taint” flavor that would ruin pork from male pigs. Raleen said it’d be simple to make a similar vaccine that would work along the same mechanisms in humans. Whomever they injected would need to take some form of HRT for the rest of their lives, as their own body would attack any hormones it produced itself. Raleen, Lexi, and I spent the night jokingly plotting to inject the vaccine into J. Michael Bailey. I liked the joke of

making Bailey into some sort of hormone-reliant pseudo-trans. I still like it as a joke.

Lexi waits. She can see I get it. "Lexi, that's only funny as a fantasy."

Raleen tries to assuage me. "It's safe. We already tested part of the vaccine on ourselves. One version on me, and a later version on Lexi." She starts in somewhat incoherently on her testosterone levels, how she hasn't taken any spiro or blockers in weeks and her T is near zero, then switches subjects in a way I can't follow. She concludes, "This is the final version. So, it's not just a vaccine anymore."

At that, Lexi stands up, opens the canister and pulls out what looks to me like a Tide-stick, or an orange felt-tip marker. "See, we loaded it in auto injector, like in an epi-pen."

She takes a few steps toward me, holding it in her outstretched hand like she wants to pass it to me. She pauses, and asks, almost sweetly, "Remember when I used to show you my scars, in bed, back in New Hampshire?"

Again! She won't stop bringing up when we used to sleep together. She does it even more when she has an audience.

"I'm trying to forget."

I want to see the epi-pen thing. I reach out from my sitting position so she can hand it to me, but fast, so fast I don't catch it, she closes her fingers around it like the hilt of a dagger, and slams the blunt end into my forearm. There's a prick as the needle goes in, and when I pull my arm back, the point scrapes my skin. By the time I'm instinctively cradling my arm, blood is welling up.

I'm in disbelief, looking at Lexi, trying to understand how somehow, it could have been a mistake.

"Now you'll have a scar too," says Lexi.

## WINTER, NEW HAMPSHIRE, TWO YEARS TO CONTAGION

Lexi and I are in her bed, and she is showing me her scars. She has many. Morning light bends around the edges of thick black curtains. I wonder if it snowed more overnight, if I'll be able to drive home. Lexi spent all her savings on a small three-room cabin on a lake in rural New Hampshire, the interior marred by half-finished repairs or renovations; from every surface you look, nails and screws menace soft fabric or skin.

Lexi was a committed alcoholic for a few years. She started working for her father's company right out of high school. By the time she hit twenty, she had a routine: come home from work every day, lower the blackout shades so no one could see in, put on women's clothes, and get to work on a bottle of vodka. She bought the cabin so that she could expand the routine without attracting notice. Occasionally, she'd get it into her head to repair or change something in the house, and would tear out a cabinet, or pull up a floorboard. Most of

those projects, she never completed. "This place is a shithole," she said, by way of inviting me in for the first time. In the eight years she owned the house before starting transition, I'm the first person she's invited inside her house, afraid that anyone else would see either the skirts and panties or the vodka bottles.

"What's this one?" I ask, tracing long scar of faded pink on her forearm. I'm lying propped up on one elbow, pressed against her prone body.

"I used to make bats on the lathe for my baseball team," she said. "Didn't always do it sober."

"And this one?" A white button of scar tissue just under her armpit.

"Fell over blacked out, and hung myself up from a nail." She isn't bragging. She's matter-of-fact: half a claim of responsibility and half a shrugging abdication of it, the way one might explain that there's garbage everywhere because a raccoon got into the trash. Yeah, you could have fastened down the lid, but raccoons gonna raccoon, so what can you do?

"Any of these scars from bullets?" I ask. Which is not as crazy a question as it sounds. Lexi has a lot of guns. Handguns are scattered on her coffee table

the way that television and video game controllers clutter up mine at home. We are right now lying in bed beneath an arsenal: a sniper rifle, a shotgun, and an AR-15 modified to be automatic, all hung horizontally above the headboard, so that you can accelerate from R.E.M sleep to deadly motherfucker in a matter of seconds. Last night, I asked if they were loaded, and Lexi shrugged. "Wouldn't be much good if they weren't." After a few beers, she admitted that a few of the fucked up things in her place were fucked up or half-replaced because she had shot them to shit while drunk.

I'm fascinated and repelled by the life on display in this little house. It is nothing like mine. I am getting a doctorate at Dartmouth and have a fellowship. I live with my girlfriend of eight years in an apartment attached to a stately New England house that belongs to a professor of medieval literature, a woman who certainly owns no guns. To furnish our apartment, I brought my grandmother's mid-century Eames table, and my girlfriend brought a vintage Baccarat vase. We both know from Eames and Baccarat. Most of my friends live in one of the five largest American cities and work jobs in media or firms of some sort. Lexi and I share only three

points of commonality: we are both trans, we are both newly on hormones, and we are both lonely as fuck.

I answered Lexi's ad in the "t4t" section of Craigslist personals. After talking online, we first met up at a gay bar in Manchester. There, Lexi admitted to having gone through my Facebook photos. "Your girlfriend is really hot," she said, and then paused and spun her beer coaster. "So, like, I don't get why you're here." I didn't know what to say. How do I tell a near-stranger that my girlfriend and I have only once had sex since I went on hormones? How that one time, with my cock hard and vulnerable, I looked down at her so gratefully, admiring that amazing, undulating hair fanned across the pillow like a underwater mermaid's, just as she furrowed her brow and said disconsolately, "You smell different." How just then, her face crumpled into tears? How I tried to get her to have sex anyway? How I wake every morning afterwards to her back, want to spoon her, but pull away from the chill of her grief, knowing that I beckoned it by my choice? How do I talk about the nights hiding from her, Skyping men out of a need for validation, the things I tell them so that they'll say, *yes, you're a woman and I'm gonna fuck*



*you like one.* Most recently, it's a man named Sidney, in Seattle, with whom I play elaborate phone-sex role-play games in which I'm his submissive silicone trophy wife. Why did I want to meet Lexi? The answer is the things I can't say. That I can barely think.

My answer is the same as hers on guns, the same kind of wordlessness. "Why do you need so many?" Four times she began an answer, something about how no one is going to hassle her, that she always had grown up with guns around, that she's not a victim, that she's had some bad trouble, and each time she seemed as unsure how to speak an answer as to why she has so many guns as I had been when she asked why I had wanted to meet her. Not that either of us didn't have an answer. Our answers were just unsayable.

The next scar Lexi shows me is on her abdomen, and the next after that, a jagged line cut by a fishing hook where her hip bone kisses against the inside of her skin, which she pulls her panties down and aside to show me.

## SEATTLE, CONTAGION DAY

**M**y arm no longer hurts, but I'm cradling it anyway, to emphasize that I've been wronged. I'm mad in a way I haven't felt in years—mad like I got when I was a teenager. Lexi fled right after she stuck me, stomping up the stairs and locked herself in her room with some kind of metal blaring, so I'm outside her door, screaming through it. I'm not even sure what I've said so far. But the important points I've made are that she and Raleen are fucking losers, and this is what I get for trying to be included in their stupid freak coven. Raleen isn't one for confrontation, so I can't quite understand why she hasn't fled too. She's at the bottom of the stairs, watching me like the dumb puppy Lexi's made of her.

Finally, I whirl on her. "What are you down there waiting for?"

She widens her eyes, and shifts her feet, but doesn't move.

"Fuck you both. I'm out of here." I pound down the stairs towards Raleen, expecting her to

move, but instead she reaches out and snatches my wrist.

“You can’t leave.”

“Don’t touch me.”

She doesn’t release my arm. “Say you won’t go.” Her fingernails dig into my skin.

“Raleen! That hurts. Are you tripping? Let go of me!”

“No, you’re sick,” she insists.

I twist my arm, trying to torque it free. “Please. What was that? Your estrogen? Stop playing Lexi’s tricks.”

Abruptly, she screams, “You’re sick!” Her fingers grips down again, cording tight as she pulls herself to her full height for leverage. The aggression slows me, puts a crack of doubt in my anger. She’s anxious. Unnerved. When I stop struggling she drops my hand, and raises her arms. “Please,” she says again, “Let me show you.”

On the couch downstairs, she pulls open her laptop, curling up small as I lean towards her to see the screen. She calls up the website of a bio-engineering company called Improvac and protests that she didn’t know Lexi would do it. But I can’t make sense of the site, so I can’t figure out what she’s

trying to disavow.

When I can get her to stop mewing about what she did and didn't know, she explains how the company, Improvac, has been vaccinating pigs and deer against their own sex hormones for years. The vaccine causes a body's antibodies to bind to gonadotropin (GnRH), the hormone that signals the production of all sex hormones in mammals (estrogen, testosterone, progesterone). The website features an animated video intended for an audience of industrial pig-farmers, showing how the vaccine makers synthesize GnRH, then hook it to a foreign protein, which they inject into a body. The antibodies of the immune system then attack the protein, after which they recognize it and classify GnRH as bad. Subsequently any and all GnRH in the body triggers an autoimmune response, resulting in a complete cessation of the production of all sex hormones.

In the commercial vaccines, the producers bonded synthesized GnRH to an inert protein, or one that the immune system can easily defeat. That's what Raleen did in the trial injections she gave herself and Lexi. But the version Lexi stuck in me? That was a GnRH bonded to a live bacteria.

"What does that mean, Raleen?"

She pauses and says quietly. "It means you're contagious."

I want to scream at her again, but I'm afraid she'll clam up. My fists are so tight the nails feel like they're breaking skin, but I hold my tongue.

"I chose strep pneumonia," Raleen goes on, pulling up a description of the illness on WebMD. "It's a common bacteria that can cause ear infections, but that people often carry asymptotically while still spreading it through coughing, sneezing, and touch." She begins to cry.

"What are you crying about?" I snap, "You made this shit, you must have wanted it to spread."

"I just..." Her voice falters, "It's different. I know you. I didn't know she'd start with you. I was picturing—you know—one of the frat-boys who called me faggot."

I refuse to feel sorry for her. "So what now? Stop crying and tell me what to do. How do I make it better? Can I take antibiotics?"

She shakes her head.

"You don't know how to fix it?"

She shakes her head again, just the barest movement.

In the silence that follows, I raise my arm,

trying to find the pinprick amongst the slightly irritated pores, where I'd epilated the day before. In a rush, belief washes over me. I'm sick. They infected me. I'd planned to be on hormones the rest of my life, but now I've got no choice. A sterile sow.

"Jesus, Raleen." I can barely whisper it. "What were you thinking?"

She licks her lips, and when she speaks, she's gone infuriatingly dreamy. "I was thinking..." she says, then stops and starts again, "I was thinking that I want to live in a world where everyone has to choose their gender."

## SUMMER, SEATTLE, TWO YEARS TO CONTAGION

Lexi is drunk in a way that I suppose she has been getting drunk for years. For the first half hour she just sobbed and wanted to know why she was so stupid as to ruin her life trying to be trans, but slowly the drunk has turned to rage, and now she's demanding I tell her how she ever could have thought a selfish bitch like me could have ever cared about her.

I point out that she's sitting on that selfish bitch's couch, has been staying in that selfish bitch's apartment.

She laughs, bitterly, and spits on the floor. "Fuck you, these aren't yours." I live there, but the couch is not mine, and neither are the sheet-rock walls that it's back up against, through which I'm sure the neighbors can hear her. She won't say so, but Lexi followed me to Seattle. She knows no one else, has no job leads, no housing prospects. She also, I realized, when she announced to me that she was coming, planned to sleep in my bed, until she found her own way, and perhaps after that too. To

which I was internally like: nuh-uh. But when she got here, I put her up.

I've had her here six days so far, and tonight, I told her she needed to leave, at least for a day or two, find a different bed for the night. The bed we have been sharing is a nice Sealy memory foam mattress, while the couch is an Italian daybed from Design Within Reach, and both belong to the man who lets me stay in the apartment, the fifty-year old real estate developer, Sidney, just then riding high on Seattle's Amazon boom. Initially, I called him my boyfriend, rather than my sugar daddy, because I thought that he might find sugar daddy offensive and I'd lose what he gave me. But I'm beginning to gather that he has fewer illusions about our relationship than I do, and that maybe he prefers that I call him anything other than boyfriend. But whatever he is, he's supposed to be here in an hour. He cannot find some trans girl in combat boots drunkenly sobbing on his couch.

Sidney found my online profile, at the end of my time at Dartmouth, just before my girlfriend finally stopped touching me altogether. In the spring, she took a trip to visit her friends, and when I picked her up at the airport, she flinched when I



tried to kiss her. I dropped out two weeks later, left her all my belongings, too bereft and sad to even care about the Eames table, having also alienated my parents who left it to me. At that stage I looked like neither boy nor girl, but also didn't fashion a confident genderqueer look; just wore plain slouchy shirts that I thought covered my pointy new tits, but that I learned later from pictures sure didn't. *Come to Seattle*, Sidney wrote, *I'll fly you out*. His cis wife was out of town, and he wanted me to pretend to be her, which I happily did. I spent three days sleeping on his wife's side of the bed, living the life she normally lived—and loving it. He sped me down tight curving roads in his BMW, took me to dinners where I bit down on lemony Hama Hama oysters that released the taste of the sea in a delicious goosh. I walked her cute little terrier at Discovery Park—the dog and I equally excited by the smell of the kelp beds. Sidney held me around the waist, the wind pressing the skirt of one of his wife's maxi dresses against my legs as we watched the salmon jump up the ladders in Ballard. A seal grabbing an easy lunch on those fatigued fish popped up and—I swear to God—winked at me. I winked back, because that seal and I knew what's up: Fuck doctorates, I wanna be a rich dude's housewife.

I'm staying in one of Sidney's condos in a 40-unit complex he developed in Ballard. He gets a tax break for keeping a few of the units for low-income buyers, and rather than break even on selling one of them, for now, he's simply kept and furnished it for himself. The tacit deal is, roughly sketched: I can stay here, and he can come over and fuck me when he wants, which has turned out to be for about two hours, three times a month.

Sidney is supposed to be here in an hour. I'm supposed to be looking like a hot trophy wife. My legs, clit, and ass are supposed to be shaved, because Sidney does not like hair. They are not shaved, much less enticingly displayed in the lace teddy he got me. My makeup is not done. I am not looking like a trophy wife, or even a moderately sexy tennis wife—I'm wearing a pair of ratty yoga pants and looking like a beat-down soccer mom divorcée whose recalcitrant kids want to live with their dad. My own recalcitrant kid being Lexi, who left when I asked, only to pound on my door a half hour later holding a bottle of Popov. She pushed back into my apartment, plopped herself down on the couch, and ignored all my polite entreaties for her to get the fuck out, until she had finished about half the bottle,

at which point she turned on the boo-hoos.

Now she's sprawled out on the couch, wiping her nose with a pillow. "All you care about is trying to be just as spoiled an asshole as a girl as you were as a boy," she accuses. "You don't even care about me at all."

"Lexi, please." I'm typing out a text to Sidney, asking him if we can please postpone. I don't let Lexi know her words cut at all. I show her I've got more important concerns than her tantrum. I hit send, and look up.

"Say it," she says, "Say you don't care about me."

"Lexi, what do you want me to tell you? You know that New Hampshire was horrible for me. I didn't know what I wanted."

"You couldn't have told me that BEFORE you lured me here?"

I'm trying to hold my tongue, but I can't quite swallow this. I *lured* her? "I didn't lure you anywhere, you lived in a shithole cabin and wanted to leave."

"You are so fucking..." I think maybe she's trailed off, that the alcohol is going to finally subdue her, but instead she roars, "STUCK UP."

God, she's loud. I just can't have her shouting like this. I go into the bathroom, lock the door, but I can hear her carrying on outside. She's talking about how she's gonna kick Sidney's ass when he gets here. She's on the other side of the door. She's gonna whoop his old man ass with one hand behind her back. I'm unprepared for this. This is not how my girlfriend and I used to fight.

On the cold porcelain of the toilet, I brainstorm how to explain her presence to Sidney. I text him, ask if we can postpone, but he replies that he's had a hell of a week and needs the stress relief only I can provide. Somewhere behind my anger and anxiety about what Sidney's going to do, I know Lexi's ass-kicking routine is the puffed-up hackles of a dislocated, disoriented, and terrified woman. I think Lexi's traveled outside NH, for longer than a day, twice in her life, once to New York City, and once to Vegas with her dad for a conference, before she insisted on dressing in women's clothes at work and he fired her. But I'm too pissed to do her a favor, so I'm trying to convince myself that doing her a favor is doing myself a favor.

I text Sidney and ask him how he feels about

road-head. I tell him I want to suck him off while he drives down 99, that I want other drivers to look in and see my pony-tail bobbing. Now I get a text back: *yeah, babe.*

*Keep the car running, and your cock out,* I text back. *I'm gonna get in and get to work.*

*My cock came out after your first text. It's not going to fit back in my pants until you drain my balls.*

Relief. He's not going to come in. I throw my hair in a pony-tail. Start putting on my makeup as fast as I can, no wingtips, just a smudgy smokey-eye that forgives hurried sloppiness.

When I emerge from the bathroom, Lexi looks at me, red-eyed, rumped and incredulous. "You're leaving?"

"Yeah, lucky you, you get to stay here tonight."

She follows me to my bedroom. "I'm coming with you then."

No. Absolutely not. She better not try. "Lexi, if he so much as sees your face, neither of us have a place to sleep tonight." I hold up a tight sweater dress, wonder if I can get away with wearing it instead of something slinky.

Lexi takes two steps, pulls it from my hand,

and tosses it on my bed. "He's not your boyfriend. He doesn't care about you. With a boyfriend, you can call him and tell him, 'My friend is having a hard time, let's all watch a movie and chill.'"

I pick up the dress from where she dropped it on the bed. "Who says I want to watch a movie and chill?"

She starts to cry again. "I took care of you in New Hampshire! I let you sleep in my bed when your girlfriend wouldn't let you in hers."

She starts putting on her boots, like she's going to come out with me. It's awful. "Jesus, Lexi! I throw you one pity-fuck and now I'm responsible for you forever?!"

Her mouth fall opens and the short little noise that comes out hurts my heart. I push down any regret. It's her own fault.

I look good when I leave. Black Coach heels, sweater dress barely covering naked thighs—legs looking long. Lexi is sitting on the couch holding the vodka bottle between knees that poke vulnerable and pale from her ripped leggings, and I see her take it all in, before I put on my leather jacket, toss my keys into my purse, and walk out.

When Sidney drops me back off two hours

later, she's gone, and I will not see her again for months, even though she will settle in Seattle and the few trans girls willing to speak with me after her version of that night spreads—a version of the story that includes uses of capital-A “Abusive”—will only talk about how badass and rad she is.

## WINTER, SEATTLE, ONE YEAR TO CONTAGION

I'm waiting at a straight bar for this really cute trans guy I have a crush on to show up for a drink. He noted, teasingly, that I was a "fancy bitch," and so picked a craft cocktail bar that billed itself as a "whiskey and bitters emporium." Unfortunately, the only mixed drink I tolerate is pineapple juice and spicy tequila. The bartender, a dimpled woman with envious curls, eyed me with curiosity when I ordered it, and then said "on the house" when I began to rummage through my purse for a loose ten. I knew why the drink was free, but just in case I didn't, the bartender said that she'd seen me around and I was a really *interesting* person. I thought my crush would understand my irritation at this: like, please, I already know I'm trans, just let me forget it for a second while I try to be a girl on a date with a boy. But when he arrived, he didn't get it. A free drink was a free drink, and she didn't give him one.

Now he wants to know why all the trans girls in Seattle are so angry, act so traumatized. "It's not like you're a bunch of child soldiers. Your parents



weren't killed in front of you." He asserts that even when something nice happens, like a free drink, trans girls get triggered. Like everything is a wound, everything is trauma. He starts talking about this trans girl he met a few months ago; how all she did was bitch about AFABS and encourage cis scum to die. He wanted to be her friend, but she called trans guys Aidens, and did things like pick up all her meals drive-through, because she was convinced people inside would stare at her or misgender her. He describes the house this girl lives in—a coven of trans women polyamorously fucking each other to biblical levels of drama over the soundtrack of *Skyrim* on PS3, all the while telling each other how shitty the world was away from each other, until they so confused micro-aggressions for deep violence that they walked around with knives in their boots and canisters of mace dangling from their purses—and I exhale with frustration when I realize exactly which girl he's talking about.

Two feelings rise. I don't want to be categorized with Lexi. I want to be appealing to my crush. So I tell him I'm not like that. I'm not angry all the time, much less armed. But internally, I'm thinking, of course trans girls all love and fuck

each other. Who else will? When I first learned the term *brick* for those square never-will-be-passable trans women, it was auxiliary to an explanation for another term, *masonry*: as in brick-on-brick love—only bricks get stuck to other bricks.

Except what do you do with the meanness of the word *masonry* itself—it was other trans women, the only ones that bricks could supposedly trust, who came up with that hilariously cruel slang. Brick-on-brick betrayal. But we have to understand each other well to be so cruel.

Most of the cruelty I've experienced has been inadvertant, the kind that comes from getting trampled so often that inevitably someone steps somewhere sensitive. My first boyfriend after Sidney was a married man who fell in love with me accidentally. He could not see past his own bafflement at his attraction to see me well enough for anything like intentional cruelty. We met in hotels or he came to my studio apartment after work, and his cruelty, like his love, came accidentally. Once, he took me for a weekend in a fancy hotel in Portland—the Nines—where the Los Angeles Lakers were staying. When I came out of the shower, buoyed on a carpet of steam spilling

into a hotel room designed in a modern style—no door, only a frosted glass divider between tiled bathroom and lush bedroom—I stood naked with my back to him, combing my hair and heard him murmur, “You’re so beautiful, I feel sick.” I looked at myself, then his reflection in the mirror and saw it was true. I was beautiful and it hurt him. I doubt he ever complimented his wife that way. His wife did not possess the kind of beauty that triggered a desire that made him disgusted with himself. My kind of beauty does not trace a path to stable relationships, a dining room set from Crate and Barrel, a Thanksgiving turkey with his folks. He had no conception of what to do with my beauty other than choke on it.

My friends who date women have it just as bad. Once in a queer bar, I heard a cute woman in a leather motorcycle jacket joke about her gold star status—she’d never once touched a penis. My friend Zoe had been drinking G & Ts for an hour before that, working up the nerve to ask this woman out. I found Zoe fifteen minutes later, outside the bar, soaked from hiding in someone’s dew-covered hedge on 15<sup>th</sup>, where she had cried softly in frustration.

“Yeah, that’s transphobia,” my crush agrees, “but not trauma.” He glances at my now finished drink, and I take it as a rebuke. *Go pay for the next one of those.* The more I try to explain, to list the tiny grievances that added up to an intolerable day in my life, the more I sound unhinged. A man hissed at me on the bus. A bunch of teenagers loudly discussed whether I was really a guy. A girl I only knew on the Internet left a suicide note. The cashier at Whole Foods smirkingly called me “bro.” The TV at the nail salon, playing soundlessly, featured some nonsensical ghoul that I realized, with a shock, was someone’s idea of a trans woman, someone’s idea of me. The guy at the local corner store revealed that he knew where I lived and shrugged when I asked how: *everyone around here knows about you.* And now, I get irritated at one thing: a free drink, and I sound crazy complaining about that, right? Some total loony acting traumatized ‘cause a bartender tried to be kind.

My crush sighs and pulls out an ace. He knows people that have actually been raped, have actually been beaten—hell, half of the trans dudes he knows have been, and they aren’t paralyzed with anger, convinced they’re constantly persecuted.

We're talking real Trauma, not someone whispering about them on the bus, much less the burden of free drinks. To which I know I can probably come up with some of my own friends' real Trauma, but I'm too affronted, so I just shriek: THE WHOLE WORLD MONITORS AND MOCKS MY EVERY WAKING MOMENT!

Needless to say, he and I do not hook up. He leaves me to my free drinks and my tinfoil rage hat.

When he's gone, I miss Lexi for the first time.

## RIFT WARS, IOWA I-80, FIVE YEARS AFTER CONTAGION

**M**ud squishes around my rubber boots, making sucking sounds, as I work my way down a little path onto the prairie. The snow has melted and the ground thawed, revealing half-rotten leaves and plants. The air smells fecund and the breeze carries a note of green.

At the top of a little knoll—calling anything a hill here would be grandiloquent—I spot what's left of I-80. A river of black, its banks dotted by boulders that I know are abandoned cars. Folks think I'm stupid to plant my seeds so near, but the earth looked rich and black there last year. My plants grew tall and green in the prairie grass, and the specter of bandits or militia cruising I-80 protected my crop from scavengers, even through the famine last summer.

Now, I climb onto the fork of a low bare tree, to survey the land. I've got a strain of heirloom zucchini known as Black Beauty, and last year it did well down in a depression in the land, where water

collected through the hot months.

I smell the dirt bike even before I hear it. Gasoline fumes on the wind. It's coming down I-80. I jump from the tree, desperate not to be seen, but I must have been the tallest thing for miles. A boxy 4x4 follows the bike—maybe a 90s-era Landcruiser.

Shit. The dirt bike rider sees me. The bike swerves off I-80. I go low, try to make myself invisible in the dead prairie grass. In the summer, he'd never find me, but winter snow beat down all the grass and I'm leaving footprints in the mud. The rider handles the bike expertly, taking it up the embankment, riding across the sodden prairie without getting bogged down in the muck. I find a log and press myself to it, pulling grass over my body. Frigid water seeps through my pants and jacket. All for naught. He's found my footsteps. He's parked the bike, waves a rifle to signal to the truck. I don't want to be found spooning a log. Sometimes dignity is a better defense than you'd think.

I'm sitting on the log waiting when two men and a woman approach me. Not T-slabs. The men look thin, but have hunting rifles trained on me. The woman is tall and she doesn't appear to have a gun.

"What have you got?" one of the men asks.

A stab of despair comes over me. My seeds, my livelihood, hang obviously in a bright red fanny pack just over my crotch. I should have stashed it. Idiot. "I've got nothing," I say, not even trying to stick the lie.

One of the men, late forties, signals at the woman with the end of his gun. He's clean-shaven. They haven't been traveling long. "Search her."

I give her a death glare with my one good eye when she gets near. I wear my bangs over the left side of my face to hide the worst of the dioxin scars. My hair is long and scraggled. I've been avoiding the sight of myself for years, avoiding my reflection in anything like a car window, much less an actual mirror.

When I first arrived in Iowa I took a shot of estrogen, intentionally contaminated with dioxins and distributed by a Nebraska militia, that caused rashes and boils that ruined my skin, especially the left side of my face. The physical pain hurts less than allowing myself to contemplate the waste, brevity, and stupidity of my time as a desirable woman. I've heard that the half-life of dioxin in the human body is a few years, and the boils and inflammation have lessened of late, but I will never again be a beauty.



In my sickness delirium after the shot, I told my traveling companion, a young evangelical, about Seattle: ground zero for the Contagion. Confessed myself as Patient Zero. She told me the poison made me imagine things. But when she stripped me, to get me out of my sweat-soaked clothes, and found my cock, she believed me. Trans women started the Contagion, everyone knew. They were jealous everyone else could breed. She told me the poison was God's retribution. But she stayed with me long enough to see me through the worst, and kept my secret for as long as we traveled together.

The tall woman moves toward me carefully, ignoring my death glare. Five feet from me, she tells me to stand up with my hands above my head. I comply, and toss back my bangs to give her a good look at my ruined face. She pulls up close, looks me in the eye, but with curiosity rather than the disgust which I'm used to inspiring.

I don't like it. Disgust is my last defense. I tilt my glance skyward to watch the high fish-scale clouds drift far above. She unclips my fanny pack and tosses it to the men, who examine the contents with little excitement. Her hands roam my body, searching my clothes, and then the crevices

of my body, for hidden treasure. I brace myself as her hands go to my crotch. She pats me, pauses a moment, and then carries on as if she were expecting it.

I can't help but glance back down, away from the clouds. She's got her gaze right on my face, her lips lifted into a faint smile. A memory tickles, something familiar, but I can't grab it. Then subtly, she pushes up her sleeve. On her wrist, a simple stick and poke tattoo: the letters t4t. I frown at her.

Abruptly she stands and turns away. "She's clean," she announces to the men. "What's in the pack?"

"Just seeds," the clean-shaven guy grunts. "Barely worth the gas it cost to chase her down."

"Please," I say, "If you don't want them, leave them. It's how I eat and trade."

"Shut up," the wolfish guy says.

"Let me see the seeds," the woman says. The clean-shaven guy holding my bag hesitates, but the other guy, grey haired and wolfish, nods, and the woman strides over. Both guys now have their guns slung across their backs, the strap crosswise over the chest. She reaches out to take the seeds, but quickly and viciously kicks Cleanface in the knee.

He falls forward, clutching his leg, and she lunges for the other guy. "Help!" she shouts, and it takes me a second to realize she's talking to me. All three of them are on the ground, but Cleanface is unslinging his gun. She's doing what? Stabbing the other guy? They are both in puffy green down jackets, a jumble of marshmallow man limbs. Cleanface lines up a shot, but forgot to take off the safety. He's got it off when I grab the barrel of his gun and jerk it upwards. The crack of the shot is so loud, I scream. Then pain crackles through my shin and the prairie grass rushes at my face. He's kicked my leg out. I am prone, offering the back of my skull for a execution shot. My eyes see only grass and dirt, but my mind feels his bullet's desire. My limbs move so slowly, as if through sand, compared to the electric speed of the fear burrowing through my thoughts. It's a split-second, an eternity, before I rise, and yet the bullet hasn't come. Like some feral animal, the woman is on Cleanface, hitting him with a stick, then bending back his thumb when he reaches out to fend her off. She screams at me to get the gun. I play tug-of-war with him, my hands on the barrel, the stock, everywhere, contorting myself to keep the end away from me, dancing so it won't point at my

feet, and I hear a hollow clonk noise, and his grip releases.

The tall woman scoops up both rifles and the seed-bag. "Come on. Hurry." I can't tell if the men are dead or stunned or what. I see she must have stabbed one of them, because she pauses at the dirt-bike and slashes the tires with a bloody knife.

When we get to the 4x4—a Mitsubishi Pajero, not a Landcruiser—she opens the front door and turns the keys, still in the ignition. The diesel engine farts black smoke and comes alive. "Tee Furty," she says to me. I have no idea what she's saying and no breath for talking anyway. All I know is that I'm in a truck with her and she stabbed the last guy with her in that same vehicle.

An hour later, outside the Quad Cities, she turns down a dirt road, driving slowly past fields gone fallow. There, she begins to talk, and when I hear more of her voice, I realize why she seems so familiar. She's trans. Not auntie-boy trans. Trans trans. Antediluvian trans. That forehead. She had a brow shave, before the war, when you could buy things like that. I tried to picture her face with heavy contours and highlights, like she might have once looked in a pageant scene.

“Zoey,” she begins by way of introduction.

She seems surprised when I insist that I don’t know “tee-furty.” She says it slower, “Tee-Four-Tee. Like the letter T and the number 4,” which startles me into a pause before I feign incomprehension. Of course I remember the phrase, but it’s all so bound up in my memory with Lexi, bound up with contagion day so long ago. I’m not about to bring that up. I won’t even place myself in the same city as Patient Zero anymore. I’ve been telling the same story so long now that I practically believe it: I caught the contagion in California, from the masses fleeing the Pacific Northwest, then auntie-boy’d my way East to the Prairie Zones.

“The only t4t I know” I say, “is the old Craigslist thing.”

“That’s right, that’s it,” she says. “It’s kind of a joke. Trans girls fucking trans girls. But really, it’s an ethos. Trans girls loving trans girls, above all else. Hoes before bros.”

The associations for me draw on an uncomfortable past. “So, it’s like a trans girl-gang now?”

She swings the wheel and pulls up to a barn. I see some women on the porch of a farmhouse. I’m on the alert, thinking about trans girls, and for

once, I suspect these girls are trans too, not just auntie-boys. “It’s not a gang. It’s a promise. You just promise to love trans girls above all else. The idea—although maybe not the practice—is that a girl could be your worst enemy, the girl you wouldn’t piss on to put out a fire, but if she’s trans, you’re gonna offer her your bed, you’re gonna share your last hormone shot.”

“That sounds like some kind of trans girl utopia.” I’m so rattled, it’s not even sarcastic.

She laughs. “Please. You’ve met a trans woman before, right? Do you think the words trans women and utopia ever go together in the same sentence? Even when we’re not starved for hormones, we’re still bitches. Crabs in a barrel. Fucking utopia, my ass.” She glances at me. My nervousness must show plainly. I can’t tell if I’m safe or not.

“Here’s what it is,” she says, a little more gently, “We aim high, trying to love each other and then we take what we can get. We settle for looking out for each other. And even if we don’t all love each other, we mostly all respect each other.”

After a pause she says, “I remember how I used to be before the contagion. Embarrassed to be seen with another trans woman, for fear that her

transness would reveal my transness and we'd both get clocked. T4T is an ideal, I guess, and we fall short of it most of the time. But that's better than before. All it took was the end of the world to make that happen."

I peer through the windscreen. Those girls are definitely trans. There's a girl with her shirt cut low, and her jacket open. Old-school breast implants.

"What about you then? You're like some kind of t4t badass vigilante?"

"Oh no," she says, "I was looking for you. The girl who started t4t heard you might be out this way. That's why I got myself hooked up with those hunters."

"Fuck." The whisper comes out of me.

"No! Don't be scared. You already know her," says the woman. She takes the muteness of my scrambling reaction for incomprehension and clarifies: "Lexi."

My good eye swivels around, around, and settles on a figure sitting on some low wooden steps, picking the meat off a chicken bone, and watching our truck idle. There.

## TRANS BEACH PRIDE, SEATTLE, SIX MONTHS TO CONTAGION

**T**he girl down at the water's edge throws the football in a beautiful spiral, so smooth and steady you could use it for a drill bit.

I want to catch that football. I haven't caught a football in three years. And normally, I'd be embarrassed—I'm self-conscious about the way displays of athleticism curl my body into the old shape: arms lank, shoulders loose, hips solid and straight; shrugging off the balancing-a-book-on-my-head pose that I've cast my body into. But today is Trans Beach Pride at Seattle's Dyke-Ki-Ki Beach, so who cares? No one here is going to think I'm manly, and if they do, they'll accuse themselves of internalized transphobia much more cruelly than I could ever voice. It's safe in a way that I yearn for. I've hardly been to any trans-themed events in Seattle. I'm nervous of Lexi and her familiars, an anxiety that's relegated me to a de-facto stealth lifestyle. Not that I'm stealth, but in trying avoid the awkwardness of talking trans stuff with cis people, I've ended up



allowing my close cis friends to treat me like I'm just like them, which constrains me to act just like them. Now, at Trans Beach Pride, the sweetness of briefly unfolding my body for once, in front of girls already unfolded, tantalizes as much as the thought of refolding when I leave hurts.

The girl backs up and throws a hail Mary from the stony beach to a cluster of other girls, out in the shallows, but she's got so much zip that it steams over their heads, towards where I'm standing out on the pier. A split second of muscle hesitation before old instincts release and I dive off the dock to snatch the stinging ball from just over the water as it passes me by, my body stretched full length when I splash into the end-zone below, as I must have a thousand times in high school, when we skipped school in the early autumn to leap for deep bombs into the still-warm waves breaking white over the pier at Edgewater Beach in Chicago.

Coming up from the water, I hold the ball with one hand and check that my bikini top is still in place with the other, before shrugging to acknowledge the half-impressed, half-joking claps of the girls who had been waiting to catch the ball. After such a catch, it's socially incumbent upon

me to throw the ball back with equally casual skill, but I haven't thrown a football in a few years, and I doubt my arm will work like it used to. I line up my finger pads on the laces and gauge the distance to whomever the girl with the amazing arm is. She's got blonde hair with dark roots, and moves fluidly in a retro-cut one-piece. The throw leaves my hand wobbly and weak, tracing a flaccid arc that ends ten feet short of her toes, which seems to please her. She trots forward and picks it up, then calls out, "You don't have to throw like a girl to impress us. Just throw it like you normally would." When I hear her voice, hear the mockery, I realize it's Lexi—she's dyed her hair, put on some curves.

Some of the other girls, standing ten or twenty feet in from me, widen their eyes at each other. Another girl snickers. I feel stupid in my body, ashamed at the inference that I've been caught trying to out-femme a bunch of other trans women. I want to protest: what about that catch I just made? Instead, I needlessly adjust my top and press my lips into a *hahahagoodone* smile.

I feel even more like a shit-eater when I see that a few girls' looks are lingering on me, and I realize that they might know of me only from Lexi,

and if so, I probably just confirmed everything I suspect she's ever said about me: stuck-up, aloof girl, who wants everyone to be impressed with her, but has no real skills or abilities.

Lexi's next perfect spiral comes right back at me. I have only to stick out my hands, and there it is. The other girls, none of whom I know well, seem relieved and back up to surround me, given to understand that I'm to be included, that the range of Lexi's arm and grace is just now re-extended.

## RIFT WARS, FIVE AND A HALF YEARS AFTER CONTAGION

Lexi and I are lying on her couch, and she is examining my scars. I have many. The morning sun makes bright parallelograms on the floor, in one of which has parked a long-haired cat named Ivan. I wonder how much longer Lexi will let me stay here. She's claimed a tiny cabin next to a little pond, on the edge of the land patrolled by the t4t women. Rot, from years of rain water streaming in, mottles most of the surfaces. Lexi replaced the sheetrock on the eastern wall and installed some gorgeous cabinets that she scrounged from one of the abandoned Amish farms, but by contrast the renovations mostly call attention to the need for repair everywhere else. "This place is a shithole," she said, by way of inviting me in the first time. "It'll be a step up for you."

She's been living here for two years now. After the rift, she'd fought in the Texas secession, where she fell in love and married another mercenary soldier, a cis woman named Digna who'd eventually

gotten hooked on the lux Floridian testosterone that so many mercenaries took to stay sharp and strong. On the Lux T, Digna's personality changed as much as her body and "our love lost its rhythm," which was Lexi's way of saying that in fits of jealousy, Digna repeatedly beat the shit out of her.

In the first few weeks I stayed on the land, I misunderstood Lexi to be some kind of founding leader, but she's not, she's just respected. The girls who had first claimed the land simply liked her t4t tattoo and the long-ago ethos that had caused her to stick and poke it into her thigh. They revived it and made it their own with a vengeance that had only been a daydream of Lexi's back in Seattle.

Lexi drags the pad of her finger down my dioxin scars, and then over to a scar down the side of my neck. "Any of these from bullets?" Lexi asks. When an evacuation bus in Idaho crashed up in the mountains, a shard of glass sliced into my neck. Between infection and sunburn, the wound healed into a keloid.

"None from bullets." I answer, "But I'm sure you'll have your chance, yet." An AR-15 hangs above the couch, and Lexi set her .45 set on the side table after it poked me when she lay to spoon me.

Laying together fully clothed on the couch is our first touch in all these weeks, all these years—our only touch, I suspect, likely the limit of the comfort we can handle from each other. “Your last attempt on me didn’t even scar.” I hold up my arm for her inspection, one of the few places with skin still smooth and immaculate.

I mean it without malice, but Lexi’s jaw sags a little. Remembrance darkens her face like a cloud passing over a field. “Oh, it scarred,” she says, and rubs the peach fuzz on my forearm, “just everywhere on this earth but your arm.”

In all these weeks, Lexi and I have not talked about that day. We don’t know how to talk about it. The unknown Patient Zero and her infector. The two most wanted, most despised, most legend-en-shrouded people on this scarred earth. The fear of it, the enormity of it, keeps the words from both our mouths. Now, I ask the nearest question I can stand. “Lexi, why did you want the girls to look for me? Why am I here?”

Lexi begins to explain once more, but I already know the story. The girls had heard from a seed-trader about a trans woman from up near West Branch. From the description, Lexi got this notion

that it was me. The thought ate at her and she began acting erratic, or at least more erratically than usual. She started organizing a mission with some of the younger girls, especially a gung-ho crew of former auntie-boys who figured out that estrogen was right for them, and found an explanation for it in t4t. But some of the older women, including Zoey, were wary of Lexi's inability to explain her fervor. Lexi wouldn't divulge anything more than that she thought that the West Branch woman sounded like someone from her past. They suspected that past had to do with Digna. The last thing they wanted was any connection to Lux T on their land. So instead of Lexi's full-on expedition, Zoey linked up with a pair of hunters out of Waterloo. If I turned out to be some kind of Lux T fiend, she'd let the hunters do their thing. If not, a posse of hunters had raided Zoey's only milk cow that winter and she didn't have much use for them.

"No, not how I got here, Lexi," I interject.

"Why?"

She uncurls her arm from around me, and lies silent.

"Why am I here?" I repeat.

"An apology, I guess," she says heavily, after a time.

And then I say it. And as it comes out of me, it feels good. It is a weight, a shame, that I've been wanting to set down for years, much too burdensome to share, so I'm always alone, always just at the edge of life, clinging on, but unsure why. I sometimes think about my regret in the same way as I think about my closeted years. They are nothing alike, except for my desperate need to speak their truth, and my total inability to do so. "I'm sorry, Lexi. I'm really so sorry."

Her body jerks away from me. "No, that's not what I meant." She sits up, as quickly as if I've spilled water where she lay. "Wait? What are you sorry for?"

"I was never t4t."

"Fuck t4t. I'm surrounded by trans women. Have been for years. I have lots of t4t. I wanted you to be t4me."

"Yeah, that's what I'm sorry about. I was never t4Lexi."

A court of law, if a just one still exists or ever existed, might convict Lexi for her actions, but mine have been the thought-crimes: the cuts that no one could see or feel but Lexi. She had always known what I wouldn't admit: I had been embarrassed of



her. I had thought of myself as too pretty, too high-class and educated, too smart to be stuck with her, except for during my moments of weakness, neediness, or loneliness. I had been ashamed of the ways that I was like her, ashamed of the ways our transness made us sisters, if not lovers.

For a while we sit side by side, our thighs close but not touching, until Ivan interrupts our reverie, insistent for petting. Lexi tosses him down irritably, so he tries out my lap, his weight enough for me to grunt. Lexi reaches to push him off me, but I tell her it's okay and she relents, rubs his ears, then reaches up to touch my lank hair. "You know what?" says Lexi. She lightly tugs my hair, pulling my good eye towards her. "That night, when you came over to my cabin, I couldn't sleep, I was so excited to have met you. I got up, and I laid out all the equipment to go ice fishing. I wanted to take you out on the ice the next day. But in the morning you just wanted to leave. All I ever really wanted was to do cool stuff with you." She lets my hair drop. "You always found a way to reject me for it."

My eye wanders out the window to the pond. A light breeze ruffles the leaves of the pond-fed trees that stand alone on the prairie field, and

textures the water's surface, breaking the sun's reflection into thousands of shining strings. I try to imagine Lexi and I ice fishing on it in the winter, sitting together on upside-down buckets in the cold. The faint taste of butter-fried fish ghosts across my tongue. I want that so bad. "We can still do cool stuff," I say.

Lexi snorts, then stands abruptly. "Sure, cool stuff!" she says sarcastically, then puts on a girly voice. "Maybe we can play XBox today, huh? Or, wait, I know! Let's go to Sephora!"

I deserve that, but it lands hard.

In a way that I know comes from years of habit, but that I still find threatening, she snatches up her .45 and stuffs it into her makeshift hip holster. When she speaks again, her tone has lost its sarcasm. "Despite everything, ever since Zoey brought you back, I've been daydreaming up plans that include you," she says. "God, you and I are so stupid."

"What plans?" I venture softly, "Could we go fishing on your pond?" I'm stuck in that snowy morning in New Hampshire. What if I had just stuck around long enough to have gone ice fishing?

She purses her lips, like she's either going

to laugh or cry. “Oh Sweetie, you’re cute. That’s a drainage pond. There’s no fish in there.”

“Oh.”

No one has called me Sweetie in years, much less described me as cute.

If I keep looking at her, I’ll crumple into tears. “Well, you just said I was stupid,” I choke out.

“We are both stupid,” said Lexi, “Because despite everything, I still want to do stuff with you. Things are never going to be the same. I know that, but I want to make it not as awful, so I can live with myself. T4T for real. Hormones for the girls.”

And then she tells me about this T-slab farmer up near Tipton, a bloated ‘mone-runner named Keith. He’s got his hands on a couple of the mutated estrogen-piglets that were developed in the Kansas City farmlabs, before the Texas militias bombed the whole city in an attempt to starve the provisional government troops of their supply. All we need are a few of his pigs to get started.

## SEATTLE, CONTAGION DAY

I need to get home. I need to quarantine myself the five or six days, the period over which the strep pneumonia will be most contagious.

Raleen tried to get me to stay in the house, but there's no way I'm sharing a roof with Lexi and Raleen for a week. Should I take an Uber? The bus? I risk exposing someone either way. How long until I'm fully contagious? My nose is running, but I convince myself that it's hypochondria, that it's just the cold air outside. The Seattle winter chill. Best to walk. But it's four miles and I'm in high-heeled boots. I've never walked so far in them. I'm turning circles on the little patch of sidewalk in front of Lexi's house, unable to decide.

Twenty minutes later my heels clack-clack along at a pretty good pace. My feet hurt, yes, but I'm altering my stride, swinging my hips, trying to ease the pressure on my toes. I'm nearing Volunteer Park. The walk is maybe two or three blocks shorter if I cut through—but then again, I don't like cutting through the park at night. But these feet!

There's a group of teenagers smoking a joint on a bench, their faces orange in the sodium floodlights shining off the brick conservatory at the center of the park. I change my path to cut around the building's side to avoid them. The wind blows crisp, needling through the seams of my too-short leather jacket. Thank god I wore a scarf.

"Hey there." A male voice. Two figures, right next to me. Instantly, the adrenaline rush hits, and I have to work to not show my startle. Where did they come from?

One of them steps out into the thin concrete path. He's in my way. I don't want to slow down, but I don't want to step out into the leaves and clumpy dead grass in these heels. I catch his eye involuntarily. He's youngish. Mid-twenties. White, with hair indeterminately brunette in the grubby orange light. Somewhat well-dressed, like a frat boy who doesn't often do laundry.

"Puss in boots," he says, softly.

I ignore him, keep walking towards him. I'm going to slide past him on the thin sidewalk. No fear. I press my lips into a thin line and offer what I hope might be an unafraid and cold nod. I'm past him now. But a hand snakes out, grabs onto my

elbow, turns me back toward him, gently but insistently.

“Hey,” he says, almost wonderingly, “You’re not a puss.” Then louder so his friend can hear. “Not a puss at all.” He’s slightly drunk maybe, the last two words slurring together to sound almost British: *a-tall*.

I wait for him to release me. Trying to express no emotion. But he pulls me toward him, hard so that I lose my balance, and flop against him, like a woman steadying herself on a heaving ship. “That’s cute,” he says. “I like that.”

His friend laughs, “You’re crazy.”

“I need to go home,” I say. I feel dead calm. Emotions are shutting down.

“In a minute,” the guy says. “I wanna see your dick.”

The friend hoots. “You’re crazy,” he says again. They’re both grinning at me, and his grip hasn’t loosened. “Go on,” the guy says to me, shaking me just a little. “Then I’ll let you go.”

My emotions are back. Fury, then a wave of bone-weary exhaustion, then back to fury, when they both begin to laugh. How do they think they can do this? How would they like it? I’m so tired of

this shit. I want them to know how I suffer. I want them to suffer. I open my mouth to say something, and he leans forward, to catch my words. But no voice comes out. Instead, an elated, vengeful sprite rises up from my lungs, ascends through the passage of my throat, and announces itself to the world as I cough right in his face.









## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Torrey Peters is a writer living in Brooklyn. She has an MFA from the University of Iowa and her essays and stories have been published in *Prairie Schooner*, *Epoch*, *Brevity*, *McSweeney's*, *Fourth Genre*, *The Pinch*, *Shenandoah*, *Gawker.com*, and her work has been anthologized in *Best Travel Writing* (2009, 2010), *Tinderbox Editions*, *I'll Tell You Mine: 35 Years of the Iowa Nonfiction writing program*, *WaveForm: Twenty-First Century Essays By Women*. However, past publications aside, she's trans, and has concluded that the publishing industry doesn't serve trans women. So now, she just wants to give her work away for free to other trans girls. For more of her work, including her other novella, *The Masker*, check her website, [www.torreypeters.com](http://www.torreypeters.com) and follow her on Twitter: @torreypeters