MISS MAJOR SPEAKS

THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF A BLACK TRANS REVOLUTIONARY

BY TOSHIO MERONEK AND MISS MAJOR

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For Kitty, Puppy, and Pretty Linda

For Kitty, who helped me realize
it was OK for a tall gurl to wear heels.

For Puppy, who was short and sweet.
I still think about you every time I wear white.

For Pretty Linda. Say about her what you want,
but everyone wanted some of whatever Miss Linda had.

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Introduction

For more than fifty years, Miss Major has played the crucial role of surrogate mother and grandmother to countless trans and queer people around the world. Three quarters of a century in, her story has the twists, turns, lane changes, and reverse maneuvers of the most well-choreographed car chase scenes in movies. The price of getting to this point has been high: the lives of two of the three people she's called "the loves of my life"; five totaled pre-1977 Cadillacs; two homes destroyed by fire; both of her original kidneys; an eye; a toe; and all but one tooth—she called it Snaggle—that stuck to her gums solo for years before she drove to Dallas, Texas, on her seventieth birthday and treated herself to a new set.

Major has surpassed the expectations of those she calls "The Powers That Be": the corporate, government, and nonprofit actors who work to preserve the status quo, and the forces in the world who want us all to fit into our proper places in an established social hierarchy, from which they can look down on us and make sure we don't fuck with the money and privilege they hoard. And to get under their skin even more, she has a good time, modeling a tremendously joyful resistance that has inspired thousands of people to do the same, including me and so many of the people I love. To us, Major is a hope-giving anomaly who wipes away cynicism and helps us believe that better worlds are at once possible and worth fighting for.

Major's driver's license lists her date of birth as October 25, 1946. Her parents raised her and her two siblings, Cookie and Sargeant, off the salaries of a United States Postal Service administrator and a beauty shop

manager during the few years when a Black middle class began to grow in cities like Chicago. There, she graduated high school at sixteen, and her family paid to send her to college in Minnesota, where she knew she'd find the corn-fed white boys she was into at the time. In the dorms she was placed with a roommate who couldn't keep a secret, and after he discovered her suitcase of femme clothing, she left school before the first term was over.

Major went back to Hyde Park to live with her parents, whom she loved despite their recurring attempts to smack the queen out of her. Once a month, she trekked three hours up to Riverview, an amusement park on the North Side where she bought hormones from a dealer who held office hours under a rickety wooden roller coaster. Major hadn't even turned twenty when her mother declared that Chicago wasn't big enough for the two of them, so Major and a friend stole a car and took off in the direction of New York City. They were so eager to leave that a cop pulled them over for speeding before they had made it past the city limits; Major wound up in jail for six months. But her determination to get out of Chicago didn't waver; from jail, she deputized her little sister Cookie to collect money for a bus ticket to New York. Cookie had rarely missed a chance to rat out Major for testing arbitrary social boundaries, including experimenting early on with their mom's shoe collection, but she made up for her past transgressions by delivering the money to cover the bus fare.

After arriving in New York, Major called up her aunt, an administrator at Goldwater Memorial Hospital on Roosevelt Island, to ask for a job. Aunt Alfa had a strict requirement: Major would go by another last name, Rodriguez, so that her aunt wouldn't be known as the supervisor who threw her "fag nephew" a bone. Major lasted six months in the morgue; the experience didn't go to waste, as her familiarity with makeup increased with the body count. But she'd come to New York to perform, not to paint.

The Apollo Theater had an established drag show called the Jewel Box Revue, which Major had first seen in Chicago during one of the group's cross-country tours. Its posters promised the "Most Exciting Deception in the World," starring "twenty-five men and one girl." During the weeklong Chicago run, Major had dressed "in her stuff" and spent nights at the stage door until she met the stage manager and charmed her way onto the cast, taking on a backup role when one of the regular cast members fell ill. She rejoined the cast in New York.

Trans women, especially Black trans women, still have few job options that offer a living wage. The stage shows at the Apollo didn't pay enough to survive, but sex work did, as Major learned through other performers at the Jewel Box. One night working the Avenues in Lower Manhattan paid the bills faster than the drag shows and the morgue combined. Major learned how to clock undercover cops and further refined her ability to sweat charm, gliding between the social groups that claimed territory on the Avenues and clients of all sorts. One client was a state legislator from Albany who helicoptered Major and another friend to the state capital, for an all-night shift that paid as much as a month's worth of regular hooking.

The worst johns were the police officers, who paid not in cash but in fewer arrests. The energy it took to get a cop off was usually preferable to the alternative: time inside some kind of cage. After an arrest, Major would emerge from a patrol car with wrists bruised from the handcuffs, her forehead puffy from impact with the car door when the officer had pushed her inside. Usually the destination was the closest precinct jail for one night or five, as when Major was knocked out and tossed into a paddy wagon during the 1969 riots against a police raid at the Stonewall Inn. Even at a time when the West Village was ruled by queens, the Stonewall was one of the few gay bars in the neighborhood where trans people weren't immediately turned away at the door by gays and lesbians, who were often as vicious as anyone toward the gurls. At the time, most of New York's gay bars were owned by mafiosos who kept them open by paying off the NYPD and its vice squads. Still, raids were common, and to Major, who is probably the most notorious living veteran of the Stonewall rebellion, a night involving the police was "just another night downtown."

At other times the patrol car would stop at Bellevue Hospital, a psychiatric asylum that was a dumping ground for gurls during Major's twenties, in the 1960s. The hospital's "pavilion for the insane" was a predecessor to maximum-security civil commitment "hospitals," where most "patients" are held indefinitely under threat of force by corrections officers, barbed-wire–topped walls, and the newest surveillance technology. The psychologists in charge at Bellevue did their own policing, enforcing the government's antiqueer laws and controlling their patients' freedom. Just as Major and the gurls cop-watched for each other while on the streets, they taught each other the particular words and facial expressions that could win the sympathy of the psych doctors and nurses at Bellevue. These tricks

also included reciting in your head all the titles of the books on the doctor's shelf as he attached your genitals to a plethysmograph—an unscientific device, still deployed in a few states, used to determine a person's sexuality by monitoring their blood flow as they watch a slideshow of erotic photos.

When sex work and lip-synching at the Jewel Box and elsewhere didn't translate into a living, Major fell into side hustles like driving a cab part-time during the day. If you've been her passenger, you know she can drive fast while under stress as well as any stunt driver. That skill would come in handy a couple of years later after she fell in with a guy named Tex and embarked with him on a Bonnie-and-Clyde–style trip through the tiny towns that dot upstate New York. Tex's expertise was in cracking safes, but he was notably taller than your average guy—taller than any of the short guys that Major usually dates—and he got clocked by someone who recognized him and his height from a similar trip he'd made with a previous girlfriend. An attempted ninety-miles-per-hour escape from the New York State Police ended in a crash with an oil truck and five years locked up in a town on the edge of the Canadian border.

Prisons depend on the bodies of marginalized people to justify their existence and their expansion, so in the 1990s, they poured money into finding words that would make them sound less toxic. Observing that the public responded positively to words like "rehabilitation" and "treatment," prisons hired architects and designers to draw the blueprints for "kinder, gentler" prison environments, with special wings for trans people. They developed "mental health jails" and "behavioral health justice centers" where police could store homeless people, disabled people, and people with drug addictions without telling them when their imprisonment might end. But prison, especially the insanity-inducing, soul-numbing atomization of solitary confinement cells, which is where trans gurls are often held, is not a place for rehabilitation. These prison makeovers more often only increased their brutality; after the 1971 rebellion at Attica Correctional Facility in New York, for example, the dining hall was outfitted with a system of pipes that could release tear gas in case of future uprisings. GED programs have been shut down while the lists of censored books and magazines grow in an attempt to keep people from organizing. Prison cells are disproportionately stacked with poor, disabled, Black, and Brown people; Black trans women, who are often at the intersection of all of these identities, are the most

overrepresented group inside prison walls. A study by the National Center for Transgender Rights and the National LGBTQ Task Force found that almost half of Black trans women in the United States have been incarcerated. Once inside, their abuse rates are extreme. The abolitionist group Black & Pink surveyed 1,100 queer and trans people in lockup, and one out of three described being assaulted by prison staff. Groups like Black & Pink and the Transgender, Gender Variant, and Intersex Justice Project (TGIJP) have made themselves known to the system, so the system must employ ever more devious ways to cloak the abuses.

Major had an intimate knowledge of the prison industrial complex long before her incarceration in New York. She was still a teenager when she saw how the Chicago Police and correctional officers at Cook County Jail seemed to dig their handcuffs deeper into your wrists if you were Black or trans. She was even more familiar with the medicalized arm of the system, inside the layers of locked anterooms that made up the old psychiatric ward at Bellevue. But her stint in New York *was* a time of politicization. “I never considered myself a political person,” she says, until she met Frank “Big Black” Smith, one of the leaders of the Attica rebellion. Locked up in the solitary wing of the Clinton Correctional Facility in Dannemora, New York, Black and Major managed to form a friendship through the cell walls; with Black’s mentorship, Major began to formalize her thoughts around power and oppression, including her understanding of prisons as a twisted extension of slavery. Black introduced her to new awareness of overarching systems, explaining how prison towns like Dannemora functioned like company towns. The rich got richer by paying off politicians and wooing workers to the car companies of Detroit and missile manufacturers of South Los Angeles; like them, prison towns became sustained by a core industry that drew residents who needed work, their paychecks signed by the industry of incarceration.

Black and Major talked about the leadership role she could fill for her gurls—how she could encourage them to learn about their oppression and fight it. He helped her understand the importance of role models and comrades to encourage you to “change the status quo and make life really fucking annoying for the Powers That Be.” When she was released from prison, Major brought their conversations to her gurls back in New York City, and later to San Diego, the Bay Area, and Little Rock. She taught some of the gurls coming up behind her to understand that jobs are usually

a means to an end. Sometimes overtime looks like running into a cop who gives you the option of blowing your way to freedom. But sometimes you're tired, and over it all, and you don't want to waste the lipstick, and you can't avoid the arrest. "You don't get to be seventy-something as a Black trans person without breaking a law," she says. The laws were written to serve a small group of people at the top of society's ladder, whose power comes from controlling the people on the lower rungs.

Major left Dannemora as most prisoners do after years inside: with next to no money and support. It took a couple of years for her to get herself together, but she put the political awakening she'd had in prison into practice when the late seventies viciously quieted the gay metropoles. The HIV/AIDS crisis was beginning, silencing the bathhouses, bars, and sexual liberation movements that were already under siege by the government. The FBI, the CIA, and police departments infiltrated and destabilized groups that were anti-war, or pro-worker, or anti-racist, or pro-housing for all. Leaders like Big Black were surveilled and imprisoned, and in some cases assassinated.

The Gay Liberation movement hadn't stopped excluding trans people during Major's years inside, but as gayborhoods like Chelsea and the Castro emptied out like ghost towns, Major put into practice some of the lessons from her time with Big Black. People who contracted HIV were neglected or treated like the devil's spawn, so Major collectivized some of the gurls as the "Angels of Care," enlisting them into service as nurses, just without a formal degree. Gurls who hooked for a living not only faced a high risk of getting the virus on the job, but they were also losing clients to the disease and the fear of it. The "legitimate" work of caretaking was a way to fill the holes in their purses, and a relief to the gay men with HIV they cared for. These men's family members were often too afraid to do more than wave from the apartment door, but could afford to pay the gurls to give fastidious sponge baths, act as therapists to offset the depression that permeated the entire community, and, occasionally, offer distraction from the dread in the form of a quality hand job.

In the late 1970s, Major met a woman named Debbie and had a biological kid with her named Christopher, who still calls Major "Daddy." The pictures we still have from that time show Major in masc tweed suits. Her gender presentation and the relatively traditional relationship lost her some friends, who felt like she was betraying her trans identity. She and

Debbie weren't soulmates, though. As the new decade began and Christopher began to learn how to talk, Major's relationship with Debbie eroded to the point that they didn't speak until twenty-four years later, when the producers of a documentary about Major's life set up a reunion for them. Major's parents took the breakup worse than anyone, because Major's relationship with Debbie had reinforced a delusion they'd maintained since Major was a kid—that her gender nonconformity had simply been the world's longest phase.

She and Debbie were over, and anyone she cared to know in New York City was reeling from virus shock. The shock deepened as parts of the city became unrecognizable to her—the combined and overlapping forces of local politicians, law enforcement officers, real estate moguls, and Wall Street bankers bled New York of queer landmarks and patched over them with condos and office space. "Urban renewal," as the gentrifying class called it, claimed notorious cruising spots like the porn theaters of Times Square and Chelsea Piers, where activist Sylvia Rivera lived out her final years homeless. Apartments and lives went up in flames as landlord arson became a popular weapon among real estate industrialists, who were happy to sacrifice lower-income tenants to under-cut rent control laws. Every time we're in a car driving through the Village, Major's eyes well up with tears. After the second time this happened, I started to request that cab drivers avoid the Lower West Side whenever they could.

Major spent her next quarter-century in California, moving between San Diego and the Bay Area. HIV/AIDS care was one of the few above-ground jobs where out trans people had a chance at a second interview. In San Diego she formed another Angels of Care collective, and in San Francisco she drove the city's most controversial van: its first mobile needle exchange. Needle exchanges save low-income people from dying, so naturally they were resented by local neighborhood associations that represented landlords, as well as the bleach company Clorox, whose executives were pissed that their flagship cleaning product might be associated with HIV-prevention programs. Major worked mostly where the gurls were: in the central Tenderloin district that was a (relatively) safe haven for trans women and nonbinary people. Enough queens and queers lived here to support more than three dozen community meeting places, including hustler bars, leather clubs, and activist printshops pumping out newsletters and wheat-paste–ready posters.

The Powers That Be had long attacked the Tenderloin through an assortment of strategies, with constant attempts by the real estate industry, city hall, and the neighborhood associations it supported to gentrify the neighborhood as well as the adjacent Polk Gulch and South of Market district. Rent-controlled apartments and SROs (long-term, single room occupancy hotels), erected after the 1905 earthquake and the subsequent fires that burned much of the city to the ground, were bulldozed and replaced with buildings of faux-weathered steel or one-way glass in a dark, presidential tint, to fit the taste of newcomers used to the law-enforced quiet of wealthy suburban neighborhoods. It was thirty years after Stonewall, but gurls were still being hospitalized by beatings and disappeared by police into one of San Francisco County's seven operating jails or highly securitized "transitional housing." In the Tenderloin, the transitional housing was run by private prison conglomerate Geo Group and operated out of the site of the Compton's Cafeteria riot, a trans-led anti-police rebellion that preceded Stonewall by three years. Like New York City's elite with the Avenues, San Francisco's ruling class would discuss the Tenderloin as if it were some lower level of Hell—but members of this elite were also regular patrons of the sex workers, dealers, and bars there.

HIV was becoming a "manageable, chronic disease" for people with access to medicines patented by a few pharmaceutical companies, but for Major's gurls, a doctor's office could be as hostile a place as any other, even in San Francisco. Major started working for the nonprofit Tenderloin AIDS Resource Center (TARC), located on the first story of a brick building in the thick of the Tenderloin. She turned a vacant apartment next door to the office into a sometimes twenty-four-hour drop-in center called GiGi's Place, then took the first swings of a sledgehammer to the wall separating them. Technically, GiGi's Place was part of the clinic, but the setting was anything but clinical. Major brought over a couple of sofas from the house in East Bay where she lived with Christopher and her dad, who was now retired and a widower. He claimed that he had moved out west from Chicago to look after Christopher. Whether or not he had accepted that Major was gender nonconforming, he had clearly accepted that he had no chance of changing her. The sofas were intended to make GiGi's Place as homey as a living room for the gurls, most of whom had been cast out of the houses where they'd grown up for being trans. After sofas came mirrors that the gurls who worked nights out on the streets of the Tenderloin could

use to dress up, paint themselves, and help other gurls do the same, as Major had done with her gurls in New York City.

TARC's white gay executive director felt that Major's vision was too radical—even if radical action was necessary to slow the infections and deaths of so many queer and trans people—and pushed back against Major's efforts with GiGi's Place. Major started working on an exit plan for him, with help from her co-worker and comrade Smitty, who worked the front desk at TARC. Smitty started working at TARC after being fired from the city's most well-funded HIV nonprofit, the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, for attempting to unionize. By the mid-1990s, the foundation was being run by white, gay guys with money who held galas honoring pharmaceutical companies like Gilead Sciences that were in the HIV maintenance business; many of the city's politicians were happy to show up at these events to court the wealthy gay guests. At TARC, Smitty helped Major organize staff members who were willing to lose their jobs to keep the clinic from following the inaccessible, corporate model of the SF AIDS Foundation, which increasingly devoted its resources to awards galas celebrating politicians who mined the community for liberal credibility. In a staff meeting, Major stood up and told the executive director that TARC was forgetting its mission to help the residents of the Tenderloin. "The natives are getting restless," she said. Smitty and Major's efforts were successful; by the time GiGi's Place was celebrating its one-month anniversary, TARC's executive director had submitted his resignation to the board.

When I became a speck of space dust in the galaxy of Major, she was already an icon in the coastal queer capitals of New York City and the Bay Area. It was 2010, and I was in San Francisco, where I subsidized my writing by walking the dogs of gays who worked in the tech industry and selling fake designer handbags on eBay. I'd randomly break out crying whenever I thought about the future of the world, then go through a second round of crying out of guilt for feeling sad at all—my life seemed fucking fantastic when I compared it to the lives of others, particularly the strangers who lived where the Obama administration was sending drones to bomb hospitals and schools.

Benzodiazepines and opioids helped minimize the crying spells, and this was in San Francisco, where you don't have to spend a year on a wait

list to see a therapist for free. Interns at the queer therapy collective in the Castro flexed their active-listening skills while I spent my allotted fifty minutes per week trying to convince them that everyone should be way more worried than they seemed to be. I had so much evidence: the wildfires; the pandemics; the drones that were designed a few miles south in Silicon Valley; the enslaved laborers in the Congo who mined the raw metals that went into those drones; the sweatshop workers in Shenzhen who manufactured them; and all the people being terrorized or mourned after the United States shipped the drones to Syria and Yemen. Those fucking robots, I warned, they would come for the Bay soon; the people I loved, who didn't want to be part of the society that was pushing us into a landfill of outdated drone parts, couldn't afford to buy and stock bunkers in New Zealand for the coming apocalypse.

San Francisco is the city with more billionaires per capita than anywhere else in the world, and even more aspiring billionaires, who convince the city to spend several billion dollars every year terrorizing anyone who can't afford to live in the more than 40,000 homes owned by corporate landlords: using fire hoses to clear people from the sidewalks, locking them up for sitting there in the first place, and confiscating and selling or throwing tents into a dumpster, for eventual transfer to one of the five floating garbage heaps gathering in the middle of Earth's oceans.

San Francisco is Rome at the end of the Roman Empire, and I started feeling like my skills—like how to tell a real Louis Vuitton from a fake—were meaningless, and the things I believed—like how the world was about to end no matter what I did—verged on nihilism. Major came into my life at what felt like a low, and had the combined harm reduction effect of the hundreds of blister packs of Indian Klonopin I'd bought with Bitcoin in the previous couple of years.

Major was on dialysis when I went to her apartment in North Oakland for the first time, still waiting on the upgraded hepatitis B vaccine. She looked gaunt as a ghost, swaddled in a fleece blanket. But even with her health dimmed, she was *on*. I had written a brief profile of her for Truthout.org—an excuse to write myself into her life—and having worked with several of Major's Bay Area daughters, including her daughter Janetta at a trans-led nonprofit in San Francisco, I passed the trust test. For most of her life, Major's charm had made it easy for her to find people to assist her for free

—but for the first time at seventy, she could afford to pay someone to be her third hand. My job involved the typical assistant duties, like answering emails and setting up her calendar. It also involved some more eccentric responsibilities: bringing cash to her gurls and retired rent boys-turned-friends in the Bay when they needed it, dropping off chocolate milk at her old neighbor Rose's in exchange for a stack of mail-order clothing catalogs that were still being delivered to the apartment where Major had lived five years ago, and helping to salvage the remains of a doll collection after Major's trans daughter Kim was burned out of her apartment building by her landlord.

For years I traveled with Major to her speaking events, where invariably my tasks included finding the nearest bank because most of the ATMs at hotels limit withdrawals to $200 a day. I got used to the elevator rides with rent boys; they became considerably less awkward after the first few trips. I grew accustomed, too, to her audible ecstasy when we were on the East Coast, in one of the bigger cities, where there were Chinese restaurants with her favorite food—wor wonton soup—which she drank out of the extra-large mugs decorated with curse words that have their own special corner in her leopard-print suitcase.

I published a series of interviews with Major a couple of years before the documentary about her story and some television appearances raised her notoriety outside of the coasts, and as corporate media started to see profit potential in exposing trans people to bigger audiences than all the combined crowds of the Jewel Box Revue's thirty-year run. She was seventy years old when global fame came for her and a few other Black femmes of color. "We're the flavor of the month," as Major says. It can be hard to remember that it's been less than ten years since trans people began to regularly appear in the media. Until very recently, they only made news when someone in the community died, and even then, their stories were usually covered only if the details were extraordinarily shocking, savage, or gruesome. Now you can buy T-shirts and coffee mugs bearing the words "Miss Major Taught Me." She's careful to admonish everyone she mentors about how fleeting and superficial these upswings in representation can be. The queer and trans elders I know survived a considerably darker era than I can understand. I've felt the envy of older gay men who don't have HIV/AIDS but transparently carry the weight that comes with surviving such a tragedy. For all she's

survived, Major gives younger people permission to imagine a life that isn't defined by plagues and neglect by corporations and the government.

The politics of these alternate worlds is not built around privileged LGBTQ+ people who just want to see themselves represented within the current system, either—people with a superglue grip on every microphone the media hands them. There are only so many mics with the ability to project loudly, and so these status quo preservationists project their own values onto the imagined monolith called the "LGBTQ community," as if they're speaking on behalf of queer and trans people everywhere. Only a few voices get heard above that noise.

Fortunately, Major is one of those voices, and usually she can cut through the noise without raising the volume. Major flirts and you want to flirt back. She tells a story, it gets emotional, and before long you've got what she calls "goose pimples" down your spine.

Major's image has appeared on cards in several tarot decks, and she used to sing in the country's first all-trans gospel choir at the City of Refuge Church, before it was gentrified out of San Francisco and relocated to its current home on a street lined with airport hotels near Oakland International. The drone of airplane engines and freeway traffic keeps new settlers from calling 311 to submit noise complaints about the choir and its beloved organist, who plays in high heels and long talons.

But in spite of these credentials, Major insists that she is not spiritual; rather, her intuition and lifetimes of experience have steered her to safety in many life-or-death situations. Her commitment to being a mentor and mother has kept her from discussing those traumatic experiences with her daughters, and being a source of strength for the gurls has strengthened her in turn—like the metaphorical tree with roots so deep that even when it sways with the wind or loses its leaves for a season, the worst storm won't bring it down. In the decade I've known her, she's become a mentor and a mother figure to me too.

In the years leading up to the fiftieth anniversary of the Stonewall rebellion—a week of riots against police violence that catalyzed the lesbian, gay, and trans liberation struggles—I must have booked her for more than a hundred events and press interviews. Major is, after all, probably Stonewall's best-known living participant. Her descriptions of the years following Stonewall contrast sharply with mainstream accounts of the event's aftermath. The narrative upheld by Pride boards, corporations,

corporate media, and the National Park Service, which designated the Stonewall Inn the first LGBT National Monument in 2016, was one of unadulterated progress: Fifty years since Gay Liberation's widely hailed origin, gay marriage and inclusion in the military proved the movement had won.

It was the story that the police chiefs of New York and San Francisco, the media, politicians, and aspiring politicians wanted Major to tell. If we're generous—and history shows that we need not be—we could attribute this to the basic facts of biography and background: that most people who end up in the leadership at police departments, or in offices at city halls, or reading teleprompters on TV, are drawn from the ranks of the ruling class and very rarely from the lower orders. They're a stratum of people who don't know that hospital psych wards, prisons, jails, and detention centers are like spaceships built by parasitic aliens, as Major put it in an anti-cop video message that reemerges every June. They're a class of people who don't know these institutions are gorging themselves on trans women of color and growing bigger with every gurl they consume. The people who dictate the loudest, most circulated narratives about what it means to be trans and alive usually are not trans. Nor do they know that to be trans usually means to be turned down for most jobs; to do sex work and other labor in underground economies; to wait in line for as long as it takes to get a special sort of table at a restaurant—a panopticon of a table, where your sight line affords you a few extra moments to notice and react if someone in that restaurant decides to come at you for your transness. Gay nonprofits have spent years separating themselves from the gurls; after winning their big-money issues, like gay marriage and the repeal of President Clinton's Don't Ask Don't Tell policy, they suddenly pivoted to issues like the Pentagon's policy on trans military service because they needed to justify their existence. None of these issues are particularly compelling if you're struggling for bare necessities like a stable place to live. The powerful take the word of "experts" who are the beneficiaries of this system, such as the monied diversity consultants, sometimes privileged trans people themselves, who benefit from a social order that feeds off its outermost layers, the people on the outskirts.

"Things have gotten better, in a sense, but we're not where we should be," Major says. "They might make little changes here and there, but even then, they're only changing things for a few of us. And it's got to be *all of*

us or none of us." And sometimes obstacles to liberation can seem liberatory, because "they"—the people on top of society's pyramid—depend on deception, ignorance, and our exhaustion to keep us trapped under their feet, carrying them, like a moving walkway, toward their next party.

At even the most basic levels, the state still often refuses to extend protections to trans women exposed to violence. I remember attending an event in Southern California, where Miss Major joined other queer and trans prison abolitionists, including CeCe McDonald, in discussion. CeCe had only just left a Minnesota prison two months before and would go back to working at a coffee shop in Minneapolis after the event. She was twenty-three when she was attacked by a group of drunks who started following her and her friends, yelling, absent any creativity, rascist and anti-trans slurs. A cis guy with a swastika tattoo smashed a bottle on her face, and during the fight for *her* life *his* ended. After police arrested CeCe, she and her case prompted a movement. Her name became a slogan, condensing in a word an entire analysis of interlocking forms of oppression and the political necessity of self-defense. So, when taggers left the words "Free CeCe" on the Minneapolis jail where she was held during her trial, people in faraway places, even on distant shores in France and Japan, wrote the same message on their local institutions that targeted the marginalized and vulnerable. A Black trans gurl who defended herself against a group of white supremacists ended up taking a plea deal that came with a two-year sentence.

So no, not nearly enough has changed.

As the trans liberation movement gains momentum and allies and power, its members wrestle with whether to align themselves with established nonprofits and politicians who have started to see the benefits of campaign support from token Black trans women. In 2020, Elizabeth Warren's presidential campaign team contacted figures known within trans/queer circles to publicly support the candidate, and hired the first Black, out-as-trans campaign consultant to staff a major presidential run. Although targeted outreach to LGBTQ leaders wasn't new, Warren's presidential campaign was the first to actively and publicly recruit trans women, using identity politics as a constituency-building tactic. Major was just emerging from a year of recovery after a stroke in 2019, a recovery made possible by

a fundraiser that paid most of the hundreds of thousands of dollars in medical bills that Social Security had refused to cover, in part because of her time in prison and jail and psych hospitals. As she reviewed the slate of presidential candidates, she observed that Bernie Sanders' campaign was the first to message hard around health care for everyone; he never preached about increasing our already massive military spending, which would inevitably come at the expense of social services for the gurls. She also heard him emphasize the similarities between the United States and other countries, rather than talking about "America" as the moral compass and gold standard for the rest of the world. In Spain a decade earlier, Major and hundreds of activists from around the world had testified before the UN Commission on Human Rights during its first conference on the conditions of trans people, speaking about problems that were, at their core, almost identical—marginalization in their home countries. Major knew that politicians rarely deliver on their promises, but figured it couldn't hurt for a few in the community to hear messages about fairness: that people should be able to live with dignity no matter who they are, and that the government needed to reclaim some of the resources hoarded by the wealthy to ensure this. Encouraged by her family in New York, Major was one of very few trans people with large social media followings to express support for the Sanders campaign. Her video racked up two million views in less than a day, and Sanders' communications team spread her endorsement further. The media juxtaposed her face against trans and queer pop stars and Olympians who were publicly supporting other candidates, as the *Washington Post* declared that the election hinged on TLGB support for Democrats.

But both Warren and Sanders dropped out soon after, and by the month's end, anti-trans murders in Puerto Rico, North Carolina, and New York and the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic made the strategy of assimilation into the US political system seem far less worthy of pursuing. Under President Biden, the White House's Office of Public Engagement revived their public relations bureaucracy to "outreach to the community"; in October 2021, they convened a small video conference half-filled with CEOs of government-dependent health care nonprofits who groveled about what a difference a president makes. Bamby Salcedo, a friend of Major's from many past convenings of formerly incarcerated people, was in attendance. She had been busy organizing asylum for Latinx refugees

whose deportations were higher now than before Biden's win. After the groveling entered hour two, Bamby cut in to ask that the White House staff member administering the "listening session" allow Major to speak. "I've been on these 'listening sessions' in the past with the Obama administration," Major told the group, "and it's really nice that you give us the chance to listen. But what came out of those listening sessions from ten years ago?" The staff member was slow to respond and seemed caught off guard, so Major answered for her: "Nothing." All of the media visibility and the listening by presidential public relations assistants hadn't translated into better conditions for Black trans people.

After she moved from California to Little Rock, Arkansas, in 2016, Major reached out for advice on a new project to some of the Southern gurls and guys she knew in places like Charlotte, New Orleans, and the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee where Major had attended movement convenings managed by a close friend, the Little Rock–born and –based activist Suzanne Pharr. Major called the project House of GG (like the drop-in center in San Francisco, the GG stood for Griffin-Gracy), but changed the name, deciding it was too self-referential for a place that she hoped would be a permanent space for a community that is used to displacement. In 2022, she declared the new name, TILIFI—Tell It Like It Fuckin' Is. She wants to gather gurls who call the South home to create the queer family bond that she felt coming up with other Black trans gurls. TILIFI's physical manifestation is what she calls her Oasis: a four-bedroom house, a guesthouse next door that sleeps five, a pool, a custom merry-go-round modeled after the metal ones in the park outside her Upper West Side window—off-limits to Major's one-year-old, Asiah—and a giant old oak tree. The yard has nooks with two-seater benches for gurl talk, a huge porch with tables and hammocks, and ceiling fans that keep communal dinners cool during summer heat waves. Here she mentors some of the younger gurls from the South, who recognize that we can only get free if we feel we're worth fighting for. It's "not a training facility," but a place where a "family atmosphere" can remain in the hands of the community in case she doesn't live forever.

I know she'll survive me, but at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Alex Lee—the founder of the Transgender in Prison Committee, which became TGIJP—insisted that she put together her will and last rites; I was one of the two legally required witnesses. The experience wasn't at all

somber, as I'd expected it to be; Major was watching TV during the process and hadn't put any thought into an epitaph for a gravestone, so the words that came to mind in that moment—"she came, she saw, she conquered"—are the same ones on the official document that came to me in the mail a couple months later. Major spent a lot of years barely surviving against the Powers That Be, but she also spent most of that time "sucking every last drop of cum out of life." Her joy comes from a place I don't fully understand. Despite her taste for the macabre—the *Saw* series of movies are her favorites—she expertly tempers the dark with earnest sentimentality and optimism, always signing her letters to the gurls in prison, "Be safe and stay strong."

Since meeting her, I've been recording the things she tells me almost constantly, striving to understand the choices that helped her survive; the politics that continually astound me in their brazenness and beyond-the-status-quo imagination; the mastery of self-care that has allowed her to continue her work through the bleak moments that would break others; and the secrets that give her the confidence to refuse to be "respectable" in a society where trans and queer people are beat down enough to believe that the thought of getting to seventy is total delusion. This book is a collection of a thousand hours of our conversations in airports and cabs and greenrooms before speeches. Major's preferred format for all her public talks is a conversation—she doesn't love delivering a long keynote speech. A conversation has the potential to cement connections more than a monologue. "How I go is how you get me," says Major. "I think that that kind of thing will be helpful for the community to know—that we don't need to change or alter or mold or look like what somebody else thinks we should."

I also asked some of Major's closest comrades and friends to tell me what she taught them, what stayed with them, and the moments with her that moved them or helped them do the work they do. Major told me to do these meetings or calls without her so her comrades could speak honestly, though there were times when she pretended to nap or watched *CSI* with extra intensity while I made a call from the other end of a small hotel room. Now I understand the appeal of faking your own death, so you can hear what people would say about you at your funeral—especially for most of Major's friends, who don't get any acknowledgement until something

terrible happens to them. “Some folks in activism leave because it gets to be too much, the hurt is too much, the pain is too much, the aggravation is too much,” Major says. “And so why have I still been doing this, you know what I mean?”

She did have rules for the book. “I don’t want it harsh,” she told me. “I want it warm and embracing, like a big hug. Which is one of the things everybody mentions that they really like. A big hug from me.” We labored over how to talk about decisions and actions she took that were probably life-saving but could have had bad consequences, “without being a cop” who leads gurls into unsafe situations. “The ‘T’ comes first” in TLGB,” she had to remind me a few times before I had it down. “G-U-R-L” is how you spell the word that identifies her family. There would be cursing, “because they’ll know it’s not me if there isn’t any cursing.” “You know,” she says in the way she talks when she wants to make sure my ass is listening—a vocal trick she learned from studying Bette Davis at theaters in Hyde Park where you could pay for a matinee and stay till the end of the last show. It’s a tone Davis’s characters would use when they did something bad but know that their special femme wiles will get them out of their predicament—one that Major practiced to perfection to pass the time in prison. “There are parts of my life that I *simply* … can-*not* … *discuss*. There’s stuff you’ll probably have to take with you to your grave, and you’re probably going to have to leave the best parts out.”

Major’s way of learning is to take the wisdom that works for her and leave the rest—like the old anarchist slogan “No goddesses, no masters.” That’s why this book isn’t “Major’s Rules.” Instead it’s the words of someone with a shit ton of wisdom that younger activists can take or leave, depending on the talents and capacity they bring to the movement. “I pay attention to what my feelings are—what I view the universe is trying to tell me,” she says. “This gives me an opportunity to fill you in on all the crap that people have been trying to get out of me—to somebody who can take it on, and utilize it, and spread it out” for the people she can’t mentor and politicize one-on-one. Even though “by the end of this book, the world is still not going to be where it needs to be,” she warns, the book lays out a path for “how a gurl can take care of herself, what to look forward to, how to negotiate through this society safely, and how to get to be an older trans woman one day. You can kill a person, but you can’t kill an idea, and you can’t kill love or hurt. *That* will be wrapped in this book for people to read

and pull out of it, and go forward. I'm not saying I know everything, but if we're gonna do this, we might as well do something that'll shake their very foundations."

Major wants trans and non-trans readers to understand how getting liberated requires being aware of how oppression can cause trans people to adopt the ways of their oppressors—that the sometimes vicious competition and gaslighting in the trans community comes from the trauma, poverty, and class oppression that many trans people face. She wants to tell the gurls how she created a chosen queer and trans family and made space for them, despite others trying to kill and cage her. She's crystal clear: Without her deep connection to communities with mutual aid at their center, and without the north star of undermining the Powers That Be, she would not have been able to care for her sons and the loved ones who died from HIV/AIDS, or to provide a family-style environment for trans women who never got the chance to experience family. If self-hatred was hammered into you when you were young, Major wants you to know that you're important—that being an outsider helps you develop skin that's both tough and pliable in social situations. You are a stronger person because of the shit you've gone through.

"I've said what I need to say to you," Major says to me as the sun starts to rise in Little Rock. "I love you." I'm just spewing words and tangents at this point, asking about details that can wait until tomorrow. "I love you," I say back—something I couldn't have done before meeting Major. She helped me shake off the persona of a straight, masc bro, and the imitation of the reserved, Japanese ways my grandfather developed trying to win the loser's game of assimilation after the internment camps. "How do you know exactly how to shut someone up when they're going on too long, without making them feel like a straight-up asshole?" I ask.

"You're cute, gurl," she responds. "But it's time to land the plane."

I

STONEWALL NEVER HAPPENED

1

THE POWERS THAT BE

Toshio Meronek I'm going to start with the problems that still keep you up till three or four in the morning. The people you call the "Powers That Be," and the things they do that keep you from retiring.

Miss Major How heavy is this book gonna be? My god.

TM As heavy as it needs to be.

MM As far as my gurls are concerned, we've made little progressions here and there, but things are not where they need to be. They're nowhere *near* where they *should* be. With all the visibility we've gotten—or I should say a few of us have gotten—over the past couple of years, it hasn't done shit for most of the community. The murders, they're still happening. The body count keeps going up. We weren't considered important enough to count before. Maybe that's changed. Now they have to at least pretend to care, pass a law just for the police to ignore in order to keep us quiet, because one thing that has changed is that we have more allies now, and they know we have more people standing with us.

TM You gave testimony for the Supreme Court decision released in June 2020, during Pride month. They line up these decisions in June—gay marriage, trans people in the military. In this case it was a decision that

made it illegal to discriminate against trans people at work. In your testimony, you talked about how, while doing above-ground and legal work—when you were a truck driver going between Southern and Northern California, or the desk job at AT&T in San Francisco—there were moments when you were either fired or felt forced into being as stealth as possible.

MM I did give testimony. But I'm sorry because the decisions, they're gonna change nothing. Not for my gurls, at least. Most of my gurls don't have access to a college education to get the job in the first place. Say they let you come in for an interview. How do you prove that it's because you were trans that you didn't get the job? Or, OK, say the person interviewing you was truly honest for once and they tell you to your face, point-blank, that the reason you didn't get the job is because you're trans. And say you were recording [the interview], and you have it on tape. OK, where are you supposed to get a lawyer? So they change a few laws that nobody followed in the first place, and that's supposed to make us safer? Like with ENDA, the Employment and Non-Discrimination Act. The Human Rights Campaign wrote it up, and we were on there and then they took us off. We bitched about it all across the United States.

Someone from the HRC came around and spoke with all of the leaders in different communities like San Francisco and said, "We're gonna right that wrong. We'll change it to include trans people." A few years later the Supreme Court decided to make job discrimination against the law on a federal level, but does it carry any weight? No. Does it mean anything to gurls in the real world? No.

TM The histories of struggles for liberation for trans and queer people, or for Black people, or for people who didn't grow up rich, or for anyone who has historically been marginalized are told as a gradual story of progress—as if we're just climbing ever upward towards equality. When we were in New York and they were filming you for that series about how the sixties changed everything, the producer wanted you to tell the story of TLGB progress.

MM With me and that producer, it was like a game of chess. What she thought she needed for her show was a token Black trans woman, talking about the sixties and

Stonewall, talking about how much has changed for the community since then. How the government and this whole entire system has reoriented itself to care about trans people. And I could tell she was probably thinking, “Oh, she’s trans, she won’t see through this shit I’m trying to pull.” The nerve of that woman. I wasn’t gonna just *budge* and give her some story about how Stonewall changed everything and now everyone’s fucking *happy*. No!

TM Stonewall is the event you’re asked about more than anything else. So when people ask for an interview, my orders are to tell them, politely, “She’s already described it so many times. No.” Stonewall has become this symbol of nothing—it has nothing to do with the anti-cop riot that working-class trans and queer people started. The fiftieth anniversary of Stonewall in 2019, that year everyone from CNN to Home Depot called to book you as the most visible person at Stonewall who is still alive today. But you’re not a single event. No one is. Just like the movement is not one person.

MM People put so much into seeing Stonewall as this symbol. And at the time we just thought, “Oh, I guess it’s just that time of the month when cops raid the bar, so they can make their numbers for arresting fags for the month of June. But people get so concerned about the details. I don’t know about all the crap I’ve heard all these years. Sometimes it’s “Oh, someone threw a high-heel shoe.” Sometimes it’s “No, gurl, it was a Molotov cocktail,” or “Somebody slugged a cop.”

All I know is that night, they came in, and nobody budged. I guess we were just sick of their shit. And suddenly we were fighting, and we were *kicking their ass*. The cops had to back up into the bar. We had them cornered. Next thing you knew, the riot squad was there, and baby, it was *on*. “The night of Stonewall” is how people talk about it, but it was more like a week. People want to know the little details, but what I remember most is being scared as hell. We were fighting for our lives. They’re still killing us; they’re still not giving us the respect we’re due for putting up with their shit all these years. I’m giving you *the facts*

about how shit's been from the beginning, and what's gone on, how the law was in our daily lives—the facts! And so with regard to that producer lady, the whole time I just thought to myself, "There's gonna be so much of me on the cutting-room floor."

When a parade happened the year after Stonewall, couldn't find us anywhere. Not *one* of my gurls. I didn't see Sylvia there, in the front, where she should've been. But it's not about me or Sylvia. I don't give a shit whether they acknowledge or know about me, but those gays and lesbians were ashamed to be seen with us, and they *still* want us erased. So for my gurls, it's as if Stonewall never happened because it didn't change anything for us.

TM On one of our last New York trips, on the way to the airport, we passed through Chelsea, where Obama had made Stonewall the first "LGBT National Monument." The White House planned this very formal dedication ceremony. Sent you an invitation; you RSVP'd "no." These memorials and monuments have never been your thing.

MM It goes back to the fact that Stonewall, for *my* gurls, wasn't a monumental moment. Especially when it started, it was just another night—cops come in and raid the place, drag us out of the bar, and you're just hoping it's not your turn to get into the paddy wagon that night. It was just life. And now when I go through that part of town, and see what they did to the piers, I just cry. I don't want to be anywhere near that. It's like when I came to New York and worked for my aunt at Goldwater Memorial Hospital. She put me in the morgue. She thought, "He's a fag, he can paint." To me, Chelsea's like that morgue. And if you pay attention, most monuments are for one person, or one thing that some person did in their life. I wouldn't be here if not for my community, my friends, my comrades. And so to me, the ninety-nine percent of statues that celebrate one person, it's bullshit. Regardless of whether they deserve a statue or not, those people didn't get to do anything great without a damn crowd of people they worked with to get there.

TM [*I point to a side-by-side picture showing the Stonewall memorial statues in New York City. The first image shows the statues as they were*

created, painted the starkest white. The second image shows them dressed in club wear by anonymous activists in honor of Miss Major, with Black and Brown skin and natural-styled hair.] I do love this picture here. A cis, straight dude was paid to install these statues of some gays and lesbians in the park outside the Stonewall Inn in 1992. Then in 2015, some anonymous activists painted them Brown, in your honor.

MM Then the city painted them back to white the next day. "How disrespectful of them to tell the truth!" I guess instead of painting them Brown, they should've made them *whiter*?

TM What's a more respectful way of supporting trans people who came before, instead of a statue or some other physical memorial?

MM How about giving the rest of the gurls that are living here today some respect? I don't need a plaque hanging on the wall to remind *me* of where *I've* been, you know what I mean? The way I function is to do the things I do now: it's all, *all* at the bottom. All grassroots stuff, and nothing up here [s*he raises her hand above her head*], with the Powers That Be. So that's not me, hanging on the wall. What you *think* or *feel* about me, whatever I did that *moved* you, that's what it's all about. I want my memory to live on in the hearts of the grassroots—I'm not interested, really, in recognition from one mayor or another.

TM When you started telling people to vote in 2020, I was surprised because you'd said you've never wavered on your feelings toward politicians. That politicians today lie just like politicians did fifty years ago.

MM And what I *told you* was, "You have to give people who are new to this movement and to activism in general some way in." For some people, that's going to a protest, or seeing a documentary, or reading a book, that gets them thinking, "Maybe I can do something." And so no, I don't believe one person's vote amounts to shit. But it can get people in the mindset of recognizing they can fight back against the Powers That Be in some way. Maybe next time, that leads them down the path of, they'll join an organization or they'll talk to their friends about the murders, or

that George Washington had slaves, and how this country only exists because of slavery.

TM So for you, voting is a place to start.

MM If you've never had a damn thought to actually do something political, sure, I think it can be. But these Stonewall statues, or Pride, no. The parade became political in a way that I never could have imagined. Insurance companies are there, the police department is there, Mark Zuckerberg's ugly-ass face is there. I remember when it was Oakland Pride coming up, and I saw an ad for Clorox—

TM The bleach company?

MM That Clorox. I saw their logo on a damn Pride advertisement. When Guy Vandenberg and I used to drive the needle exchange van in San Francisco and HIV was killing us left and right, Clorox didn't want us using their products, because they didn't want to be associated with the trannies and fags. These are corporations who, when given the opportunity to serve and take care of my transgender community, have refused. Ambulances have not taken trans women to the hospital when they realized they were trans women. Just left them beaten up, battered, and in the streets. I remember one time in particular, there was a gurl on Taylor and Turk Streets —in the Tenderloin district—she was living in the Dahlia Hotel. She was running from some kids who were chasing her, and they beat her up right in front of the long-gone gay bar, Peter Pan. The ambulance drove up and knew that she had been drinking, told her to take a couple aspirin, and drove off. Of course, no one did anything, because the police were driving up and down the street. We couldn't just run over to her, you know what I mean? Because a lot of us have to be careful—any one of us would have been arrested if we tried to intervene. I've been there too many times when they harass gurls who are trying to help. We tell 'em politely, "Well, she wasn't out hooking," and then they take everyone. And who do you tell? Report it to whom? The buddy of the cops who arrested her, who'll say, "Oh, I saw her suck his dick to get out of jail. Now you gotta do me too."

2

THE LAW HAS NEVER PROTECTED US

TM The first time I saw you—you won't remember this—was right in front of Modern Times, this anarchist bookstore in the Mission District of San Francisco. Your Cadillac had just rolled up with the three matriarchs of TGIJP [the Transgender, Gender Variant, and Intersex Justice Project]: you, Bobbie-Jean Baker, and Melenie Eleneke. It must have been in 2013, on the night of the book party for *Captive Genders*, which was the first book that put all these issues around trans people and the prison system into one written document, and it has this spectacular interview with you. I look back and I think that it was such a key turning point for the movement. Right before the book dropped, Angela Davis had hosted that benefit at her house for TGIJP. More broadly, people in the anti-prison movement had just started recognizing that Black trans and queer people are targeted by the system in ridiculously high numbers, which underscored the importance of having Black trans women in the leadership of the movement to abolish prisons. Part of the reason for these sea changes was the work you all did at the Transgender in Prison Committee [TIP], which became TGIJP. You were the catalysts.

MM Alex Lee founded TIP back in 2003 after he became a lawyer, and he was trying to figure out how to help transgender women and gender nonconforming people in the prison system—it's where a lot of us end up for some amount of time. Alex was looking to help them in a way that would be meaningful, instead of going to lobby the state for

legislation, because we all know how rarely that actually alters power relationships between police and people on the day to day. The police don't deal with policies—they ignore them. Everyone wants to talk about banning cops from using choke holds, as if Eric Garner wasn't murdered by police with a choke hold over twenty years after New York State made that move illegal!

Alex knew all that, and he also knew that to help the gurls, you had to hire the gurls and you had to put them in a position whereby they could help themselves and help other gurls too. He understood the importance of people getting organized for themselves, by themselves. And this kind of work, it can't be about money. If you get a little bit of money, you give it to whoever needs it the most, which means paying the people who are most targeted by the system, which is Black trans women, and also indigenous women like Melenie, who was born in Hawai'i. So at the benefit, Angela and I were sitting there talking in the back, and we found out that we were fighting for the same thing, except in different communities. At the time people were still just starting to wake up to this idea of prisons being this system we must fight against, and how Black trans women get to see the worst of it, and how we're overrepresented inside. She and I agreed that the system completely needs to be dismantled, and we need to come up with a better safety system than prisons and the police. So, we came to some mutual conclusions about abolition, and centering the people who are most affected by this prison industrial complex, and in this country and any of the other ones I've been to, that's my gurls.

One thing that my mentor Big Black made me aware of is that if I'm going to help my community, I need to be aware of all the pitfalls that are around us. Not just the ones I can see, but ones I don't expect. The pitfalls that are coming on the horizon. So that's when I learned that the prison industrial complex is like an octopus, with tentacles jutting out in every direction: It catches Black people and immigrants, the homeless people and poor kids, and so many other working-class people. We have no idea where some of those tentacles are at any moment—some are even invisible. And in thinking about that, Alex and me, and the gurls at TGIJP, it became a matter of making sure that things became all-inclusive, you know what I mean? That it was an organization whereby, not only are none of my gurls going to get thrown under the bus, but

we're not gonna let anybody we care about get thrown under the bus. If we don't save all of us, none of us are saved. So this thing about putting up hospitals in the place of jails to deal with homeless people is bullshit, because it is just another form of detention—jail is not going to do anything positive for homeless people.

TM Were cops a problem in the ball scene in New York?

MM Police are never *not* a problem. In a big group, you're fine, but if they catch you by yourself, baby, you're toast. A lot of ignorant people would think police presence would be a calming thing. *No*. Your heart rate goes up. Have those people had the experience of being handcuffed, and having your wrists shoved behind your back and bumping your head as they put you into the back of a patrol car? And the cops tripping you up as you're walking to the car just so you fall, scrape your knees, tear your dress and your stockings? You can't let them catch you alone. In New York at the time, it was simple as "Wear a dress—go straight to jail."

Probably the worst time was one night when I was hooking. As a sex worker you knew most of the cops would let you off as long as you gave them a blow job. So, it's like, do I want to spend a night in jail, or spend twenty minutes and get out of these damn handcuffs? Well, this sadistic motherfucker, he took me to one of the precincts downtown in the Village, and it was just before dawn. Made me take off all my clothes, 'til the only thing left was my hair. So he kept my clothes and dawn was just breaking and the streets were filling up with people in suits on their way to work. He kept my dress, and the rest of my clothes, and pushed me out of the door in a wig and smeared lipstick.

TM Terrible.

MM It really was. But more often, with trans gurls at the time, it was "You're 'crazy,' so we're gonna take you to the mental hospital, to Bellevue."

TM Were there differences between your experience at Bellevue Hospital in the psychiatric ward and at a jail like Rikers Island?

MM No. No, there's no difference. The attitude they have to push us down, it's there in the hospitals too. It comes from the doctors. Most of these doctors, they think they know it all, and they're the ones who decide if this gurl should get hormones, or that guy should be allowed out to be in the land of the living. You're at the mercy of these psychiatrists.

TM You're a sort of therapist for a lot of people, but you've never *gone* to a therapist yourself.

MM The only time I ever saw a therapist, it was something I was forced to do, like when I was detained at Bellevue. It had started early, actually, back when I was a teenager and my mother sent me to Bridewell, which was the Bellevue of Chicago.

TM How often did you end up in places like Bridewell?

MM I lost count, child. And the thing is, it only takes one time to realize there's nothing wrong with you. You didn't cause any pain to some other person to end up there. Some cop was having a daydream where you made a pass at him, and got mad when he woke up and you weren't there, so he decided to take it out on you and put you in a padded room. So what I did was learn the things you have to say to get yourself out of there, and to stay safe. A lot of the gurls, before Bellevue even happened to me, would sit and we would talk together in groups about psychiatrists or doctors or nurses, and go down the line and tell each other what this doctor, or that nurse, needed to hear so we could get ourselves out of that situation. Maybe you were lucky and your doctor had one-half of one-seventh of a conscience, so you play off that: "Living with these feelings inside me, it's so hard to deal with." Whether or not it was really that hard for you. Once you told the people there, you'd get the sigh of sympathy: "Oh, you poor dear." You learned to do and say what you needed to say to keep yourself safe and get out of that situation. So by, say, the fifth time, you're out of there in no time. You learn to say what they want to hear, because no matter how they try to change you, they can't kill who you truly are, deep inside.

TM In addition to the new trans wards at jails, there are the new Bellevues: the modern version of asylums, the "mental health jails." The result of

“conservatorship” laws that target people who are homeless, specifically disabled people and people with addictions. In San Francisco, even as they’re closing one of the six county jails, they already have the blueprints ready to put up what the mayor’s calling the “Behavioral Health Justice Center.”

MM They can call it whatever they like but that’s a prison, and that’s the shit that we have to stop. It is just another form of detention and jail is not going to do anything positive for homeless people.

TM You’ve been inside different kinds of institutions, but you’ve also seen how these institutions have, or haven’t, evolved over the decades. For a while you were locked up at Dannemora, a maximum-security prison up on the border between New York State and Canada. Thirty years later, you went back inside the prisons, but this time of your own accord with TGIJP to work with the gurls imprisoned in California. Did you feel like anything had shifted over those intervening decades?

MM A prison is a prison is a prison. That’s something the gurls know, and younger, radical people like yourself know—people who are out to try to change things and make them better.

So it becomes a matter of sorting out whether we are actually helping the system and ingratiating ourselves with it by making little changes, tinkering around the edges, or we are trying to get rid of it entirely. At TGIJP we decided that we were an abolitionist group of people who don’t need prisons at all. They weren’t built for our protection or safety. They are still not there for our protection and safety. When they close one prison, they go out and tell the world, “Ooh, look, we closed this prison because of the abuses.” Then why the hell are you building two more prisons on the other side of town, under the cover of darkness? Right now there’s a lot of focus on building new “transgender” wings of prisons. Just spending more money on prisons, billions of dollars. How about a little money to pay a gurl’s rent, or buy her a damn meal? Why only spend money on our protection when it’s a cage?

TM The record of our new vice president, Kamala Harris, is well known outside the Bay, but she got her start in politics as San Francisco’s

district attorney, where she worked to stop health care for trans prisoners, and criminalized sex workers by supporting the SESTA/FOSTA laws [the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act and the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act] that essentially made it a crime to post ads for sex work online. In 2004, at the first Trans March in San Francisco, TGIJP members showed up with signs to protest her appearance. How much do you think people like that change?

MM Mmm.

TM Maybe that's all that needs to be said on that.

MM I think that covers it. She threw trans women and basically anyone who was poor under the bus and into a jail cell. "You've got condoms in your purse—you're a hooker." A cop catches you with condoms in your purse—that was enough for her to put sex workers in jail. And so with politics, just like everything else, it just goes back to this: Remember your history.

TM I feel like that can't be said enough right now. After the uprisings started in 2020 around George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and many, many other Black people getting killed, beaten, and locked up by police, I figured we'd be in a different place. But so many places did like San Francisco. Instead of abolishing the cops, the city increased their budget, increased their overtime pay, and then gave the business and neighborhood associations funding to hire private security forces of their own. But before all that, one of the first things they did was to print and put up Black Lives Matters posters in all the police stations.

MM How dare they. That is not gonna solve a damn thing. Nothing. *Remember your history.* It's sad, but that's what they do now. Blackface on a police department. That's bullshit; there's no other way to put it.

TM In the anti-police-at-Pride video we filmed for the group Gay Shame, you just ad-libbed about the irony of the cops being at the fiftieth anniversary of Stonewall.*

> The police have been … like aliens from another planet coming here to consume and swallow us up and then spit us out as bones.

It has nothing to do with color or religion or upbringing or money. The blue suit is all the same: They're all worthless, unimaginable, horrible people, and destructive to mankind in general, especially to my trans and gender nonconforming community.

I don't know who invited those motherfuckers to be in the Pride parade—they are the most detrimental thing to ever happen. Why would you invite a shark to swim with you naked in the sea? Because you like sharks? These motherfuckers are only out to arrest, put us in jail, lock us up, beat us up, get us to suck their dick then kick us out of their car naked to go home. Happened to me twice—I know exactly what the hell I'm talking about.

They should have never been in the Pride parade. The Pride parade is supposed to be about some sense of pride. How much pride do you have if you think the police are worthy of being there, standing by your side, holding your hand, touting the little gay flag. Fuck a flag. That shit doesn't mean a damn thing if you're not going to treat people right, or fair, or honestly.

TM We've been to events that are meant to be an alternative to corporate Pride, and there are a few Prides that have uninvited cops from marching in their parades in uniform. How do people keep the cops out?

MM I assume the best way is to stop inviting their asses to be at Pride, because they're the most harmful things to our very fucking existence. I'm thrilled any time someone is challenging those motherfuckers regarding what Pride is. Because most people don't know what Pride is about. The anguish, and the hurt, and the reason why Pride started in the first place—it was an anti-cop event. Look, yes—I know there are trans police officers. You have Black people who are police officers, and women police officers. All that's cute, but guess what: It's blue first, your other allegiances second. Once you get on that blue, child, it goes straight through to your brain, dyes your brain blue, and you're no longer whoever the fuck you were before. So no, they don't need to be there. That's where their loyalty lies. So stay the fuck away from me. They've been beating us the fuck up and continue to do so, while showing everybody else how to beat us up and kill us. So if the police are there, don't expect me there. My mind goes to what they did to Puppy, which is still happening.

TM Puppy, your friend in New York in the sixties?

MM May she rest in peace. And the person who killed her rot in hell. Puppy's dogs were bugging the neighbors. The neighbors called the cops. Found her dead in her bathtub, which was full of blood. She had

two Weimaraner dogs. Fighting dogs. Just vicious. If you didn't know Puppy, she had to tie them up, or you'd leave with one of your hands missing. Her two dogs, she'd raised them from puppies, and they kept baring their teeth when the cops would try to get to her body. They had to call in Animal Control. So someone had to have known her to kill her and leave that apartment without the dogs eating them up. We wrote up a list of all her regular tricks and took it to the station. As soon as we left, they must have lost it, because as much as we tried, hooting and hollering, they did nothing. The police wouldn't look for whoever killed her. *People* are supposed to be *people*. Since the police didn't care about it, we decided we were gonna figure out who did it. "Let's start with boyfriends and johns. We got this." Never found anybody. And so in our minds, it had to have been the cops, because they were johns, too. But we couldn't get to them. They're in bed with the mayor and the bar owners have to pay them off or get shut down, and some of the police were moonlighting for the mafia. Now we still don't know who killed Marsha P. Johnson. Somewhere in the world right now there's another Puppy bleeding out because someone found out she was trans.

TM The police chiefs of San Francisco and New York, for the fiftieth anniversary of Stonewall, apologized—very publicly, in front of a lot of cameras—for any harm the police had done to TLGB people since then.

MM And that's what kills me. All the people who are going to believe that. It's bull. They're going to keep killing us. That's why I refuse to be a part of Pride. It's a mess and I don't have time trying to beg for respect from a society that hurts or hates us. TGIJP came from that same sort of anger and sadness we were feeling. Alex and I were helping the gurls inside understand the abuses that they were going through, because when you're in prison, they indoctrinate you into thinking *you're* the problem. No, the *system* is the problem. So we tried to make them, and the public, to stop overlooking the different abuses that happen, the gurls inside who wrote the letters we were receiving, and eventually going inside and talking to the trans women and gender nonconforming people there.

TM You were in Dannemora back when the Stanford Prison Experiment shut down. Basically, it was an experiment to see how power and hierarchies work inside an isolated setting, like a prison. The psychology department at Stanford randomly chose student volunteers to play either prisoners or prison guards in a closed-off lab, trying to replicate what goes on inside prison walls. They only made it six days, because the students playing the guards grew increasing brutal and even began abusing those who had been given the role of prisoners; at a certain point they covered their heads with bags, widely considered a form of torture. I remember you saying that the news of the shutdown made it into Dannemora, where you were locked up.

MM At the time, people paid attention to that, because it was a bunch of little white boys who were college kids from Stanford. The little white boys who got picked to be prison guards turned out to be some nasty little fuckers. And it did, for a moment, show the world a reflection of what went on in our daily lives as prisoners to this system. Look how quickly and easily they adopted these roles in their fake prison!

TM You and people you knew inside, you weren't surprised by how it ended.

MM No, I wasn't, because power corrupts. Any environment that's so defined by that kind of discrepancy of power, where some people can so easily dominate others—how could it not produce abuse? That's just how the thing is set up.

TM Was there ever a time when you thought maybe there's a chance that the police could be reformed?

MM As a Black person, no. As soon as I got arrested, it changed my point of view as to what the justice system was. I saw when I went to jail for the first time that it isn't "fair." It isn't "just." The white boy that was with me went home while I went to a cell. The system was never set up to be fair, and what prisons were made to do, they're doing.

The people who make ninety-nine percent of the laws, they set it up precisely so the laws protect them and their greedy asses from the rest

of us. The laws are almost never set up to protect us, and in the few cases that they are, they break them. It's that simple.

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* See "Five-0 Out of Pride 50," March, 2019, gayshame.net.

3

NOBODY'S TOKEN BLACK BITCH

TM People who aren't queer usually don't know how cruel gay cisgender guys in particular have been to trans women over the years.

MM The ones I find that I get along with, they're not pretentious; they're not looking to lord their cis male supremacy over my community or me. And they deal with me straight up. I've got a bunch of really nice gay guys who really get me, like Guy, and Thom, and Fredo, but they're not the rule so much as the exception. And I think it goes back to gay guys might have some self-loathing, because they get put in this box with the women. And all the shit women deal with, trans or not—no one chooses the stress that society places on us as women.

Not everyone is the same. Like when I met Thom, I was working the door of this club where I did a night, in Hillcrest, when I was in San Diego. And he came with a costume for one of the gurls in the show, and there was this long line, because it was a popular night. So he tried to go right in, and I was about ready to flip, because he comes to the front of the line and tries to go straight in, and I was thinking, "Uh-uh, not this time, Mister Male Privilege." We got into a screaming match that ended with us going to lunch the next day. And so in looking at Thom and I, brothers is the farthest thing that you get when you see us, but I'm his brother from another mother. And the funny thing is: They run a test to see if you're a match to be a kidney donor, and they said Thom and I were like siblings. When I was on dialysis and having all

these kidney problems, I never told him, but he found out and went to the doctor and figured out we were a match. And then came up to San Francisco with the news. And then we went through the process. I love him so fucking much.

TM Yeah, I love that story. You had more kidney problems when we were traveling in 2018. It was scary, because you've got the highest pain threshold of anyone I know, but you couldn't really move without feeling some pain. At some point we were in your room, and I had Thom on speakerphone. You started yelling at the phone: "Oh and by the way, this kidney you gave me, it's no good, mother-fucker! So I'm gonna need you to hand over the other one!"

MM He got a tattoo of the kidney that's in me now. Since then, he let me know that the other kidney, it's in his will with my name on it. So I'm good.

TM After trans people weren't invited to the first Pride, did that affect your choice about whether to join other justice movement groups at the time?

MM At first there were so many white people. There were so few groups for people of color, and then if you saw color, it was one person walking in the middle of a sea of white people. I noticed as soon as I started at the Mattachine Society in Chicago. It was an early gay rights group, started by some communists but culturally very straight-laced, sort of middle class. If there was a Black person at a Mattachine meeting, it might be that *one* lesbian couple that sat way in the back. So it lost its meaning to me before it began. When the Gay Rights movement came along at the tail end of the 1960s, something that might have been more my speed, I had just got busted for a robbery and started my five-year sentence. I read about the first Pride march when I was in Dannemora. So, no, the event that eventually became known to the world as "Pride"—it didn't have much meaning for me. And then by the time I got out to see the parade, it was just … no.

TM Fort Lauderdale in 2019, that became the last Gay Pride you'll ever do.

MM Well, they said it was going to be a *Trans* Pride parade, so I thought, "If it's the gurls who feel they need a parade, I can support that." That's not what it was. They lied because they seemed to think they needed an "activist" with some credibility to offset the fact that it was just about attracting tourist dollars. The trans guy, the guy who convinced me to come down there—if eyes could actually kill he'd have been a dead motherfucker. I was so livid. Then at the parade he was all chummy, shaking hands with the mayor. I'm not here for that. And after all that shit, I don't know what promoting they think they did. Child, I'm riding in the parade in that convertible and these people didn't know who the fuck I was. One of them had the nerve to come over to the car with his drunk ass, and ask me, "Who the hell are you?"

"Who, me? I'm someone who didn't want to fuck your mother. I'm just the reason you've got another daddy, you little fag."

TM So at this last Pride in Fort Lauderdale, there was the gala for the Fort Lauderdale Stonewall museum, at the Ritz Carlton on the beach. The guy who brought you down there, you sat him down and you kind of explained exactly what you just said: "This was not what you sold this as." Why'd you take time out of your day to kind of read him, but mostly to try to get him to understand that he can't do that again?

MM Because number one, if it was going to be my "show," in a sense, then the gurls should be allowed to come there. It should have been accessible for them. Have some free tickets for people. You were there with me, and we went in there, and there was not one of the gurls in there. It's sad, the fact that these fags have the nerve to feel that they're on top and queens are beneath them. And so really it was either you get the gurls here, the *local* gurls, or I'm not going. I don't know Fort Lauderdale, and this is supposed to be about the gurls who live here. So that's what it was.

TM When I was coming up in the suburbs in the nineties, the Human Rights Campaign, the HRC, and their blue-and-yellow stickers with the equal sign on them were the closest things I knew to a symbol of the gay movement. They were kind of the mouthpiece for the "LGBT movement," the people who the press would go to for the "gay

perspective.” And their biggest issue was legalizing gay marriage, which the Supreme Court eventually approved right around Pride in 2015. I didn’t know anything about how narrow their view of liberation was until I moved to San Francisco in 2006, and the Bay Area groups Gay Shame and Queers Undermining Israeli Terrorism did an anti-sweatshop action outside the HRC store in the Castro. The action was meant to bring attention to how the HRC was for the gays with money, and they didn’t concern themselves with queer and trans people being forced to make HRC snow globes in factories overseas with horrible working conditions. I was so late in understanding how narrowly focused they were on their wealthiest donors. Then they threw trans people under the bus in the 2000s, taking trans people out of a federal jobs equality bill; that was the end for a lot of trans people and the HRC.

MM Groups like that felt as if we were “too out” because we were finally starting to live our lives like we wanted to. The more that we were becoming visible, the more they tried to push us back into the closet. What these people don’t realize is, when most of us came out of the closet, we burnt the whole house down, and so I don’t have a closet to go back to. And now HRC wants to apologize, because now being trans is a *trend?* After throwing us under the bus? No.

The problem with that is, you have a bunch of agencies out there that are trying to get money from the government or foundations and are willing to claim, “Oh, we do transgender services,” while in reality they wouldn’t know a transgender woman if she came in there and peed on the goddamn floor. So it’s a matter of getting these people that work at these agencies to understand that if you want the damn money, you’ve gotta do the damn work of meaningfully turning your group into a vehicle for our collective liberation.

TM The Biden administration, during its first year, created this bureaucracy to at least give the impression that it was concerned about trans people: the Interagency Working Group on Safety, Opportunity, and Inclusion for Transgender and Gender Diverse Individuals. I remember that you were on a Zoom call with them and some other trans and gender

nonconforming people back in October 2021. They called it a "Listening Circle."

MM Yes, I remember. On the iPad it was like a sea of forty-seven white faces. I almost went blind.

TM Yeah. I was watching from outside the frame, and you kept looking at me like "Why'd you do this to me?" And then after an hour had passed with CEOs of nonprofits slobbering over themselves, about how honored they were to be invited to the call, Bamby Salcedo cut in. You've known her for decades, this Latinx activist leading some of the work to stop the ICE deportations and disappearances of trans immigrants, which have increased under Biden. She cuts in to say they need to stop and let you speak, as one of two Black trans women on the call. Do you remember what you said?

MM I told them the truth. I said "I've been on these 'listening sessions' in the past with the Obama administration, and it's really nice that you give us the chance to listen. But what came out of those 'listening sessions' from ten years ago? Nothing." They can create a whole department to fix the problems that we as transgender people face, and change the way they speak to us, but it doesn't change our reality.

You know, we still end up having to do the work the nonprofits are paid to do. We have to check on them. We have to check to see if they're doing what they say they're doing. It's like if you can see someone's behind a window. You can't tell who it is, but they're there. If it takes an hour to wipe the mud clean just so you can make out who it is, that's not transparency. Some people might give up on seeing what's behind that window, but eventually, there's gonna be someone who keeps scraping until they can see who you really are. You have to do the work with an honesty and a transparency. And if they're not doing what they're supposed to be doing for us, then you'd better call somebody who can snatch that money away from them. Rant and rave and bitch about it. We can't let these cock-suckers get paid off our backs. We can't be complacent about it anymore.

In '69 we hoped things were gonna get better. Things didn't get better. Not for us. I can't give less of a shit about marrying some

motherfucker at this goddamn point in my life, but fags are happy. "Yay!" Look at the money that those gay guys spent to get that marriage bill passed. All the millions of dollars that could've gone to giving a gurl on the streets a place to live. And for what? A marriage contract? "Well, the condo can't just go to the heavens!" Marriage is a piece of paper from the government. *A piece of paper!* Guess what? Any match can take care of that.

TM So next time the Human Rights Campaign inquires about you being at a fundraiser …

MM Oh, they need to put their body in full reverse, back that bitch up about ten thousand feet from the rest of us, and don't come down this road. Erase *my* road from your motherfucking map. There is nothing they can do to rectify this. They want money by using us, because right now being trans is "the thing to do." That's really cute, but what happens when they've had enough of us? They're not giving us money or the means to protect ourselves, and to live.

It isn't just organizations, it's the constituency that supports them. It's usually gay, white, attitude-y men, and lesbians. It's a group of people that feel as if my gurls and guys and GNC kids shouldn't exist, much less acknowledging the existence of white privilege. "*Oh, well, I've never used white privilege*." "Bitch, just the fact that you can say that, and you did—you're using white privilege. Excuse me? Who the hell do you think you're talking to?" "*Well, I have Black friends*." "That's your *maid*, bitch, and you don't see her outta the house."

So in trying to get this stuff together, with the drop-in center, with TGIJP, and now with this newer project for gurls in the South, TILIFI[Tellin' It Like It Fuckin' Is], it was really hard. You search for funding and they have all this criteria: You have to go to the dinner, and you have to go to the meeting, you have to be, you know, *appropriately attired.* What the fuck is appropriately attired? And I'm sorry, if you want to take me to a meeting, and I'm talking, then you need to listen to me. I'm a big mother, so you better be extremely blind to not see me, you know what I mean?

TM The year before the fiftieth anniversary, I walked by Saks Fifth Avenue near Union Square in San Francisco, right next to the Tenderloin and Compton's [a trans/queer riot against police took place at Compton's Cafeteria three years before Stonewall]. The Saks window was a bunch of trans sex worker mannequins in eight-hundred-dollar designer skirt suits holding signs like "Remember Compton's!" If Saks Fifth Avenue was coopting Compton's, then Stonewall was gonna be a whole other level. Coach wanted you for their Pride handbag ads, and they approached you under the pretense that they needed you to come out for "Black Trans Pride," offered you a bunch of money. But it's not just the corporations, it's the Pride organizations themselves, and the mainstream nonprofits. For World Pride in New York, they felt like they needed a token so badly, they sent a Black gay dude and a trans Latinx gurl to Little Rock to try and get you to come up.

MM They were cute. I didn't want them to get in trouble with the boss. So I told them, "I'm going to tell you 'no,' but what you can do is go back and tell your boss, 'She said, "Maybe." ' "

You know when I was grand marshal of Pride in San Francisco in 2014, it was the first time they had a Black trans gurl as the grand marshal. I did it solely because some of my gurls, and the community, said, "This will mean a lot to us." But those fags could have cared less who I was or what I stood for. Janet Mock gave a wonderful speech while they were looking at their phones. After experiences like that, I'm done.

The fags took Stonewall from us before the firefighters could get a hose to put out the fires all throughout the Village. As far as they were concerned, we weren't there. The books and the documentaries, it's all about the white guys and lesbians. We all know that's bullshit. Bullshit that's still being propagated. It's *all* whitewashed. You want to wash things white, that's fine, but the last time I checked I'm not Michael Jackson, and I want to *stay* brown. It's annoying as hell, but you can't dwell on it. You can't take an ignorant, white, entitled, privileged person and have them understand what it's like to not know what you're going to have to eat the next day, not have clean clothes to put on, not have a job to go to. So we keep fighting anyway, because it's all we can do:

keep mobilizing and staying strong. And make the motherfuckers pay, every chance you get.

TM When I was getting to know you, what you were doing at TGIJP was different from the idea of "this is what activism is" that I had absorbed from society: Go volunteer and work at a nonprofit, and lobby your congressperson, and hope they'll make some miniscule change in the law to make the world a slightly better place. And of course, they get the credit rather than the activists who put them up to making the change. TGIJP was different in that it was led by you and your trans sisters Bobbie-Jean and Melenie, and you were just this fearsome trio working to help the gurls inside and community coming out. Making your way into the offices of the CEOs who run the homeless shelters and asking why they were allowing abuse against trans people who needed a bed to sleep on. You've described it as more like a big extended family than a nonprofit. You were all "alpha"-type personalities in your own ways. How do you make that type of organization structure keep going, where the structure is more like a family, rather than a corporate hierarchy with a CEO and a president and managers and everyone's beneath someone else?

MM When Alex Lee started TGIJP after he graduated law school and eventually passed the torch to me, we had already established that this organization, like most of the things I've involved myself in since then, it was something that was for the gurls. Notice the "s." Me and Bobbie-Jean and Melenie, we each had our different strengths and weaknesses and we fit in where the other didn't. We found we could work together, which isn't always easy, especially with us being the three bad bitches with the mouths we had. This was before the Internet, and so something important was that we knew each other from being around the Tenderloin, and surviving and working in the hood. We all knew what it was like coming up trans, and going through the prison system. But at the end of the day, it was a mutual respect and the bond of sisterhood that made that possible. Like you said, it was more of a family than it was a nonprofit.

TM Before TGIJP, you worked at the Tenderloin AIDS Resource Center, TARC, during the 1990s when HIV/AIDS nonprofits were beginning to become more buttoned-up, more professionalized, and run more like businesses.

MM If you want to have a place where the only people who come for help are rich white fags, then wonderful. But my gurls, they're gonna stay the hell away from there. That's not an environment that's nurturing, or welcoming to the gurls. And so in all the places I've worked I'm trying to make them feel as though it's home, even if they're just staying the night, or a few hours.

The trick is to build something that's not just in the service of someone else, but is built by someone for themselves and for everyone else that might also be in need. People have to self-organize their own places of safety, places where they can experience some freedom. It's not just that no one else will do it for you, it's that no one else can. By definition! That's one thing I try to stress with all my projects: We have to learn to move things for ourselves.

TM TARC was in the Tenderloin in San Francisco, which is still considered to be the "hard" center of the city, and yet the executive director of TARC attempted to shut down the drop-in center for trans sex workers that you formed.

MM There were a bunch of people on staff who knew we weren't serving the people we said we were. So I had to get up out of my seat at one of the staff meetings. "The natives are getting restless. And it's time to do something about that. Time to take care of the natives." The director, he was a gay white man that had been put in power by another gay white man.

I didn't get to eighty years old being sweet and gentle. I'm no flower. Fuck that. I'm a cactus—get over it. Those motherfuckers are usually on their cell phones, ordering clothes, getting lube, whatever the fuck it is they do. What they weren't doing is taking into consideration how much time it takes those of us who are barely surviving, who had to take time off hooking so we could try and get you moth-erfuckers to help us like you said you would. You can say, well, I'm an activist, but

what does your *community* say about you? They say you're a two-timing, lying, double-face motherfucking ass. Because they know who you really are. You're a snake who doesn't care. A lot of people are doing activism verbally, or making a tweet, then calling it a day. They're not doing the job. Go outside. Get wet.

TM Yeah. The increase in visibility of trans women over the past few years hasn't really changed the conditions for most people in the community.

MM There are shows about ball culture all over TV, but no one is getting into how those balls got started. I knew Crystal LaBeija and the House of Xtravaganza when the ballroom scene started. We were all in New York when they began. The premise of Houses looking out for their kids: People are believing and falling in love with it, which is good, I suppose, in a sense. Maybe it's opening up some people's minds to the possibility of queer families, of non-blood families—that you shouldn't need marriage licenses and birth certificates to prove any damn thing to anyone. Most of it just whitewashes what was really going down, and tokenizes us. "Oh, we got a trans person. Fulfilled our quota for the year."

If you're going to tokenize us, at least have the decency to consider that maybe we're not as dumb as you think. Have the courage to tell us, "This is what this is. You got hired because we need to fill the diversity quota, and by the way, we're gonna pay you half of what the white guy's making who's doing the same job as you." There was a lot more honesty in hooking than in the last couple of Gay Prides I did. Motherfucker, you brought me here to show the public you care about the gurls and you don't—there's no honesty or transparency in that. And how about let sex workers be sex workers, because whoever's dick they have in their mouth is bound to be a whole lot cleaner than a hidden agenda of some obnoxious gay guy or lesbian who woke up in 2019 and saw a billboard for *Pose* and thought of calling up their minions: "Maybe we should put a Black person on a float during the Pride parade."

It was really cute when they put Laverne Cox on the cover of *Time* magazine back in 2014, but I can't help but think, what has that done for the average gurl on the street? Mainstream visibility hasn't helped our

community at large. It's actually *more* to our detriment. The images that the cis people have of the community, they're images that aren't real to the gurls who are barely making a living. It's not real life. It's not keeping us alive. It hasn't slowed the murders, or the abuses.

II

FUCK A BUTTERFLY.
EMBRACE THE CATERPILLAR.

4

EMBRACE THE BRICK

TM What do you mean when you say, “I’m just one of the gurls?”

MM Because it’s true.

TM The people who come to your events and stay after to meet you, most of those people would probably disagree with that statement.

MM It’s not what they think about me, it’s what *I* think of *myself* that matters. It took forever to figure out who I was when I was younger. You don’t know who to talk to, and you feel as if you’re alone, and no one else in the world has the issues or the problems that you have. You don’t feel comfortable, but you don’t have the words or understanding of exactly where you fit in. Some older person would notice and say, well, “You’re different,” and that was enough justification to fuck with you. And then over time you realize it’s because *they’re* not comfortable with who *they* are. And lucky you, you get to be the person they fuck with, so they can make themselves feel better about not knowing where they fit in. And then as you get older and get out more, you realize, “Oh, there’s other people.” And so you may meet one person who’s transgender. “Ooh, there’s two of us.” Over time you learn that there’s three, and eventually, that there’s a community.

TM You have more in common than not.

MM Correct. If I don't get along with a gurl, I don't trip about it and give her hell every time we happen to be in the same room—or these days it's the same fuckin' Zoom more often than not. At the end of the day, gurls who are trans and Black, or Native American, or Mexican, or Palestinian, we have some of the same concerns and to varying degrees we've had to deal with a lot of the same exact shit as the others.

TM When you first got to New York, Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera were trying to make connections between people who were part of what was called the Gay Liberation movement, on a big scale.

MM Marsha and Sylvia and a few of the older gurls, they were attempting to protect us at a time when we were too young and too naive to know we even needed to be protected. They tried to educate us. They were Village gurls and I lived on the Upper West Side, but they were trying to get us together, so we could be a united front for what was coming.

TM The "Civil Rights era," as they call it in history books and mainstream media.

MM That. Sylvia noticed it first. She and some of the gurls in the Village started STAR, the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries, and they had protests to stop the abuses by the police and everyone else, and they ended up getting a house for some of the homeless gurls. Sylvia was in the Village, and I was uptown, at Amsterdam and Eighty-Fourth. They were a generation older than the gurls I was close with, but we looked up to them because they were trying to get *all* the gurls to unite, like the gay guys and lesbians who were forming these groups. We had no idea the fags who were claiming to have started this sexual revolution would try and pretend we weren't even there.

TM What do you consider the first political meeting you went to?

MM The Mattachines, the Chicago chapter, was the first so-called activist meeting I attended. The guys were all wearing skinny little suits, and they bought dresses with crinoline slips, petticoats, for the butch lesbians. And they had classes, where you could learn the best way to assimilate into society, to be "just like everyone else." I was just there to

take notes, and run and get the donuts, and answer the phone, because they liked my voice. I didn't last there very long.

TM Was it like cotillion for Catholics? Like charm school?

MM It *was* like that. Because, say, once a month, you'd go to the meeting and they would parade the members all around while I was sitting in my corner, with a notepad. They had to dress all in black, the guys had to wear tailored suits. They had to wear a shirt and tie. They had to wear little pointed-toe shoes. And a gurl had to wear petticoats in hoop skirts and had to have a belt on, and they had to have a little purse. The women had to have two-and-a-half-inch heels, because that's what a lot of women wore at the time, every day of their lives.

TM Two-and-a-half inches, that's the lowest they could go?

MM Yep. That was a funny experience, but no, I could not take them very seriously at all. It *was* useful, because I got to see what their point of view was on the times. And I looked for that sort of thing. The Mattachine Society gave me that point of seeing that for some people, assimilating into society is what they want. When the guys would dress up and this obsession of pretending to be straight, pretending to be whatever the hell it is they perceived to be *masculine*, when you saw it, it was funny—there's no way around it. I think about the fifties when everybody had plastic over their furniture in the living room, so if people ever came over they could sit and be proper. The sad thing about the Mattachines for me as a person was always: Why would someone want to assimilate into being something that was so hateful? Into this society that couldn't care less if we went extinct? The hurt and horror that people were going through. I'm not ready to go back and hide inside a closet, and just get erased like that.

TM You weren't part of the women's rights movement at the time either. And there are still plenty of TERFs [Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists] around—people who claim to have radical politics but won't accept trans women as women. Your introduction to the TERFs—

MM What had happened was a couple of the women that I knew that were extremely butch had so much to say about transgender men. I couldn't understand that, you know? The sexism in society affects everyone and I felt as if they should relate. But they didn't. So they were on this mission at the time, to berate them: "You're not a real woman." The women's rights movement, the people leading it, they thought it would further their movement to throw us under the bus. In the seventies, this conference that they had in Michigan, once a year, they wouldn't let transgender gurls into the place. So things like that started to change my attitude.

TM You mean the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival? The "womyn-born womyn" festival?

MM Yeah, they tried to push us further back in the closet, way back, where you throw the raggedy furs you only keep because your mom wore 'em once upon a time. And so that was just amazing, and it started the exodus of us from the women's movement.

TM They finally ended it in 2015, ended the festival, because enough people said, "Stop with this tired shit."

MM Don't claim to say you're for fairness and what's right, and then do the opposite. So, good!

TM Make something new.

MM Thank you! I want the gurls to realize that the pressures that we had to go through as trans women really make us a tough bunch of bitches. You know, because we go through the abuses that people give us directly. One in five of us goes through homelessness. As we're growing up, abuses from our families who are supposed to love us and care about us. And the moment they get this news—crickets.

The stupidest question my parents ever put to me was "Oh, why couldn't you just be gay?" I said, "*Just* be gay? How boring is that? I don't want to *just be* anything!' " My question is this: Why do people want to be accepted for who they are by the government that created this system more than accepted by themselves? In terms of interpersonal

relationships, the gurls suffer consequences from the gays and lesbians just as much—sometimes more. Up until exactly five years ago, we didn't exist to them.

TM You mentioned that Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson had a rough time with that.

MM When Sylvia and Marsha started STAR, the "community" just tore the gurls down. They said, "Don't listen to them, they're just drug-addicted, alcoholic, crazy bitches. They aren't part of this." The little gay sissies that were running around the Village back then gave all of us a hard time. But it's not that hard to understand. Just think about it for half a second: If you had to survive off the streets every day to pay rent and get a cup of wor wonton soup in the dead of winter when it's zero degrees out in New York City, yeah, *you're going to drink.* You might even need drugs because you've got to stay up to turn tricks and make a little money so you can make it through to the next day. Then you've got to go out and do it again. That doesn't make you this junkie who doesn't deserve a voice in this movement, because society deems us unworthy of respect. People that live on the street, lots of them can't make it in the college setting; there's church folks can only function in their little circles of other religious people. It's a matter of making sure that more than just knowledge, you're learning skills to sustain your existence. It's a war. You have *got* to keep on fighting. And I need to keep fighting until it gets better, 'til the world is full of more caterpillars.

TM That's what I feel the best organizers have the ability to do, is to make you feel compelled—

MM —to do something right. You know, one of the things my, oddly enough, *mother*, of all people, said to me one day was: "As you do things, you can't do them trying to get credit for it all, or tell the world that you're doing it. But you want somebody to know, so that that good that you did, it moves on through the people who know about what you've done. And you hope that they'll try to do something too." I've always tried to keep that in mind. One of the things that Janet Mock said

was that she never knew she needed me until she met me. I thought that was just the sweetest thing to say.

TM She writes in her first book that she didn't have a lot of role models.

MM And it's been that way since I was coming up, and it's still that way for the majority of the gurls. They don't have anyone to depend on, so they just have to trust this [*she points to her heart*].

TM You are, in a lot of ways, raising yourself.

MM That's right. *And* raising everyone who comes within three feet of you.

TM You walk around in a constant state of teaching Transgender 101 to strangers.

MM Uh-huh. *All* the time. Everywhere. Into the store, the clerk's gonna talk to you. The boy who's putting out the produce is going to talk to you. If you bump into somebody else shopping, they're going to quiz you. You're always, *always* on. And when it starts, it's almost always not something you can stop. *You're* in survival mode, and *they're* in inquisitive mode. If you wanna get outta there, you gotta say something, and hope they can get their shit together.

TM And that's something about you that I wish you could put in a bottle and give to people, me included. You have that special sort of empathy that so many different people recognize. And you actually are like a therapist for a lot of the gurls and guys and gender nonconforming people. You have more than a thousand numbers in your phone. I know this because I have to go through it and put people's photos with their numbers.

MM Well, there aren't a lot of us older gurls. And when you're younger, a lot of us don't have a mother figure. Now they're calling me grandmother. When I had Christopher, and then when Asiah finally decided to show up, both times it was something I felt was going to happen. It was *intuition-al*. I knew that it was possible.

TM People write and tell you in person how you make them feel just comfortable in their own skin. I remember one of the first times I saw it was when one of the gurls waited in line after an event to meet you, and then burst into tears when she finally got to the front of the line. She was maybe twenty years old, and she said the thing that affected her the most about the documentary, and by extension you, was she felt she'd never seen another person in the community really appreciate and have joy over the success or accomplishments of another Black trans gurl. She was like, "You know, I've never felt like I've been in a situation where we aren't being pitted against each other," and how it meant so much for her to see the love that you showed for the other trans people in the movie. That it was possible to love another trans woman, platonically, and not be in competition with them.

MM Yes, well, there's always that tinge of jealousy that people can pick up over the good fortune that someone else is having. The gurl told me she rewound the part in the documentary where I'm taking Tracie with me to college just to see what it was about. I was there to take out a student loan, which is how these came to be [*she puffs her chest out*]. And I explain to Tracie what good fortune that was. The thing with Tracie—it's not as if I wanted to go and put up with the motherfuckers at the college and fill out all these forms and shit. But she was really struggling with what to do in her life. Same with Julienne Brown, Mizz June when I met her. She would ask, "What am I gonna do with my career?" And now June is singing, she's doing plays, she's got her organization, the HAF [Heavenly Angel Fund] Project. And so I'm happy for her because if somebody that I know gets a chance to do something good, and I've helped to situate them in some way, I'm proud for them. I feel that thinking in that way, it keeps me stable, and the stability keeps me doing what I do. Sometimes after one of the speeches, some little delicate flower, some gay little kid will come over and tell me one of the speeches they heard or things they read about me changed their life, and they're still alive today because of that. Oh, it's hard not to just burst into tears.

Coming up there was less competition, and now it's every gurl for herself. It's so segregated now, which is to me really … weird. It's not communal. And one of the things that's important to me with TILIFIand

the activism I'm doing now is to create a sense of family. And another thing: What does "relax" mean? *No one* teaches us black gurls. How to breathe or sit with their own thoughts—you know what I mean? How to use their imaginations. It's funny that they encourage it up until you're about seven. And then after that they do what they can to beat that shit outta you. So you have to figure out as a person, what do you do to hold on to that? What do you do to keep aloft that *looseness* that you had, so that you can continue to meet people where they're at, on those different planes of emotionality and spirituality?

TM When I'm talking to you about what's going on in the world, it's helpful to have someone who's been through a lot more shit than I, for a lot longer, to reassure me that it's not wrong to feel like the world is fucked up beyond repair, but that you can try to repair what you can, using whatever skills you might have.

MM And with TILIFI, the point of having a house is so the gurls can get together from different parts of the South to share meals, and swim, and strategize, and realize we're all part of this transgender family. Because competition between gurls in the community, when we're not that big of a goddamn community, it's only going to bring us harm. People make such a big deal about how this country was founded on competition. Well, look around—how did that work out? It's a dream of mine to give my community, gender nonconforming folks, a place to come and learn, because we don't have a lot of elders to talk to. I want the younger kids to know that transgender people have been around since the beginning, and what we've done to survive.

When I took some of the gurls with me and they started working with Angels of Care, some of them had never seen a guy with HIV. They hadn't seen Kaposi's sarcoma, or what the disease can do to your body. All of the apartments would have the pictures of when the guys were younger. Nine out of ten of them were just the finest things God had created. The fine ones tended to get the disease—they were the ones who could run around getting laid. They could have anyone they wanted. On the gurls' first days, they were always amazed when they would see pictures of these guys from before the disease at the front door, and then come and take care of this "thing" laying in the bedroom.

Some of the gurls, it took me a while to get them to understand—he's that person in the photos. Who you're taking care of is a *human being*.

Most of us already knew AIDS when we saw it, though. Everybody else but us was afraid of what was happening to them. I think that it was because as hustlers and hookers, we knew what it meant, and that it was a sexually transmitted disease. So we didn't trip about it. "I'm not going to get it washing dishes or cooking food for him." It gave them an opportunity to get a "legitimate" job. Because the families didn't want to have anything to do with them, and their friends scattered like mice on a sinking ship. *Pew!* Especially once these guys got on what they called "the slide." Which is where they go on their way out. Anytime I ever went to apply for a caretaking job, the family members would be there, but where are their lovers? Not invited. And the parents are interviewing you about things like, "Can you lift them? Lift a hundred and sixty or three hundred pounds?" Fortunately, a lot of us gurls are bigger than your average bear. "Believe me, I can lift that."

And what wound up happening was I went to do a home health aide class, and I started this agency, Angels of Care. It was just my gurls and a couple of trans guys who would go and take care of them: do the laundry, cook for them, bathe them, take them to the hospital, help them with their meds. And then when they died, help the family get their stuff together.

TM The guys you took care of, what were they like?

MM Well, the first guy's house I went to, he asked me, "How big is your dick?" "What does that have to do with doing your dishes and cooking you food? I'm not gonna stir the food with my fucking dick!" But child, a couple of the guys, because of the care that they got from the gurls, they wound up leaving us their cars, or their artwork, stuff like that. And would you believe, the families threatened to sue us to get that stuff back. It was like, "You wouldn't even touch them when they lay there dying." But with Angels of Mercy, not only did some gurls get these caretaker jobs, but they could take it out of the field of HIV and adapt the knowledge they gained to other parts of health care. And keep working, and keeping our people safe. A few of the gurls ended up working for the CDC, when they started letting us train the doctors,

because nobody else had the information as directly as we did, right? We had done all this years before they had.

It's sad, because today we're still getting new infections of HIV unlike any other group. For a lot of the gurls, to get any benefits here in San Francisco, you have to have AIDS. So if you come here from Oklahoma and you're clean and you don't have AIDS: "Can I get food?" No. "Can I get Social Security?" No. "Can I—" No. You go out and get infected, you come back, there's a house, there's food stamps, there's SSDI. How sick is that, to tell a whole generation of people that the only way you're going to get help is if you get and maintain a disease that is going to eventually kill you and get rid of you like they wanted to do in the very beginning. So wrong.

5

PASSING WAS NEVER THE GOAL

TM One of the things that strangers and people who've known you a long time mention is the way you decide what gender means to *you*. Your self-expression. That it's not a binary. Which is still a radical idea to most of the world. Some of the younger people already feel it, but you might be the first person that they've heard it from who is on a stage, from someone who they respect. People spend so much time and money in a struggle to "pass" as cisgender.

MM Passing is not this goal I started out with. I simply got tired of losing teeth. I used to go into restaurants and wait till they had a table open where my back could be against the wall, just so I could see if someone tried to creep up on me. When I started out, people would say, "Why are you like that?" "Because *I like titties*, and instead of going around touching *other* gurls' titties, I can touch my own. Child, I'm just a gay guy with tits." Shocks the hell out of them.

It's like being on a road, it doesn't matter if it's the yellow brick road, or pavement, or gravel. It's still a road, and where it takes you is wherever you're going. And I think the journey is how you use that road —if you stay on it and the path that it's leading you down, or you venture off and do something else and create a path of your own, which after a few journeys becomes another road. Part of that journey is realizing you are gonna be fine as you are. Better than fine. No matter how dark the damn path gets, there's always a light. And if you can't

find it, you keep going till you see one. You don't ever, ever give up. You never say, "Shit, I can't do this anymore." Yes, you can: You just have to keep moving forward. It can take years, and some of us are late bloomers, but you figure out how to negotiate through this straight, cisgender world as everybody else does who's not white and doesn't come from money. You have to maintain and hold on to the ground that you're standing on, ward off the things that are out there that bring us harm, and keep yourself safe and stay strong. I don't mean you need to go to a damn gym, but keep yourself mentally, spiritually, and emotionally strong, because those are the things that are hard to get over.

When I started out, it was like, somebody fight me, we're good. I'll heal. But you say something, call me "nigger" as I'm walking down the street—I'll remember that. Give it a couple days and I'll see something to remind me that you said that to me. I want the gurls to be able to shield themselves from things like that. To have it roll off them just like water does off a duck's back. So that they can be strong and resilient and be the best version of themselves that they can be. Underneath all of this is, people who clock us and beat us up, and kill us, they can kill us as a person, but they can't kill the idea of who we are. They can't get rid of the feeling of being transgender or nonbi-nary. They can't eradicate it from the world.

TM You've survived a lot of fires. Literal fires. I was shocked when one of your friends told me about the time the Klan burnt a cross in front of your place, when you lived near Santa Cruz, this beach town south of San Francisco.

MM When I moved to the Bay Area and San Francisco, I was shocked, mortified, and amazed. Because I thought I was in the one place I would never have to worry about that. I thought I could just push that off my radar and just be me.

TM Sure. I've spent a lot of time in Santa Cruz and I thought it was surfers and hippies and college students. Then in 2017, this Chinese restaurant I used to go to closed after it came out that the owner, this white guy, was donating money to the head wizard of the KKK. And then I learned

about how Santa Cruz was the West Coast's KKK capital for most of last century.

MM And before Santa Cruz, this lady I saw for about three seconds in 1978, she got hold of my parents to get me a message: "Before you moved to the West Coast, you left me with something." She said we had a son together. And the two of them were living in Utah and he was having a hell of a time, out in the middle of nowhere there. So, I drove out there with Christopher, all our stuff packed up in the Caddy. Never did a DNA test, but he was a sweet kid, and the lady said, "I fell for some guy," and could I take our son?

TM So you're living in Utah, a single parent with two kids—

MM I'm at the edge, the *edge,* of civilization in Utah. The scenery was cute, but the people? No. Some white supremacists painted "nigger" on the house we were renting on a day I took a nap in the middle of the day. When Jonathan came home from school with Christopher, they told me about it, and I went to the local store to get some remover for it, and the lady at the counter said, "Oh, I thought you'd be in here for this." She already had two cans of the stuff set aside. And I said, "What, does the whole town know about it?" And she said, "We had a vote." So, "Oh, okay. Glad you all voted." At the time I drove a 1970 Cadillac, and Jonathan and I and Christopher left the next day, and as I always tell myself when I'm packing up the car, "What don't fit, stays." And so the three of us shot to California, to San Diego, the next day, where as much as the gurls were still hidden, at least there were a few of us who'd go out at night and knew a few bars and places where they wouldn't try and harass us.

TM When people ask for your pronouns for some event you're doing, my direct orders from you are "Tell them, 'She goes by *all* pronouns.' "

MM T-L-G-B-Q-I-W-F-U. That fuckin' alphabet soup shit. Try and fit those letters onto a spoon. You know, even though my ID says male, I have no problem walking into a women's bathroom and letting whoever's in there deal with it. I'm tall and I'm gonna stand up and pee, and so my head's gonna be above the top of the stall. Who gives a shit? I was a

hooker for twenty years and I've seen some freaky shit in my time, so if you're so interested in what's happening in my stall, why don't you come in here and watch? I'm *fine*, child. I'm seventy-seven years old, I'm *good to go*. But it didn't start like that. No, no, no. We all started out, my friends and I, we all assumed we were just drag queens. Because that's all there was, right? This was before the axe murderer known as Dr. Benjamin started operating on the gurls; the word "transgender" hadn't been invented yet. Pronouns are important. But if some fag calls me a "he-she" in the street, that's not what keeps me up at night. I think about my gurls, about the shit that's happening to gurls in Palestine or Peru, wherever it may be. It's important for the gurls coming up behind me to know that yes, everything is relative, but there has got to be perspective. Now, if that fag who calls me a tranny nigger is wearing a red MAGA hat and just got a brand-new bumper sticker from one of his white supremacist reunions—

TM Right. Or the axe murderer-plastic surgeon you mentioned.

MM Dr. Harry Benjamin. He coined the term "transgender." He was a very self-righteous old man. At the time when I first heard about him, he wasn't doing Black gurls, he wasn't doing gurls who were heavy, he wasn't doing gurls who were too tall. You had to come to his office wearing your shit, which meant you had to get dressed and jump in a cab to go to his office, because there was no taking the subways dolled up during the day, and risk getting beat up or something to go get your hormones from this doctor.

Benjamin was the name I knew coming to New York. He was very popular, and all of us tried to make appointments with him, until we found black marketplaces to go and get hormones. Having to deal with his shit, and criteria he came up with to get your change, it just—ugh! I hated it from the very first visit. You had to live in your "chosen gender" for a year and then go in to the psychologist who would talk at you for another two years.

Say you're a straight, white man who wants to transition. All this stuff means you might leave a job that at the time maybe paid thirty thousand dollars a year, which was good money then. And then suddenly now you're a woman and making less than *five*, how do you

adjust? How do you hold on to your stuff? You don't. I don't think Benjamin's code of ethics was fair, but it wasn't like there were many options. Every shot he ever gave me hurt, and I never really felt like it was hormones, 'cause there were rumors around that he would give these water shots to certain gurls, and save the really good hormones for the white gurls who he considered as up to his beauty standard.

TM When you changed your ID from male to female and back to male, it was partly for practical reasons.

MM I knew from experience that it would save me from a lot of drama. If I got pulled over and my license had "M" on it, then the cops wouldn't take it upon themselves to pull any shit with me with my kids in the car. In the seventies you could go into the DMV with an F on your ID and leave with an M. It wasn't a pain in the ass with all these forms where now you need a lawyer to help you fill out the forms and they've created this industry, this nonprofit industry, where you have someone whose only job it is, is to help people fill out the damn forms. They had none of this unnecessary shit like REAL ID cards, or implanting prisoners with computer chips.

TM And so changing your gender marker back to the "M," for you it never felt like an issue?

MM Well, I lost some friends, because they thought that it was making being transgender into something small or that I was belittling myself and them. And then when Debbie got pregnant, a whole bunch of my gurlfriends were just so "The nerve of her!" How dare I be with some woman and have a child?

TM You got together with Debbie after you got out of Dannemora.

MM Yeah, I started this thing with Debbie, and I knew it was possible to have a kid, because it wasn't like the prison guards were bringing in hormones at the time. They had their little cottage industries of heroin or quaaludes. I came out of there with a beard down to *here*.

I got a dick, gurl, I can *have* a child. It's not *that* much of a stretch. Debbie's had three husbands since me. She says they always say, "Why

you always talking about Major?" "Well, let me show you his picture—*ta da!*" *Child*. Those straight guys go to West Hell.

Now, when I was younger, I never had a lover. I always dated my gurlfriends' lovers and partners and stuff. Because it was safe, and I didn't have to worry about rejection. Because at the time, I was tall and very, very, very skinny. And then when I came out of prison the last time, I was like, a hundred and three pounds. Had an Afro like this [*she spreads her arms and hands as wide as she can*]. I looked like a pencil with an extra eraser. After Dannemora, I was angry and bitter, so the only guys who I knew I could have without dealing with any rejection were guys who were already having gurls. And so when the first one of my gurlfriends' boyfriends came to my apartment and cruised me, I went with it. And I went, "Well, that's *her* problem. He ain't mine." And from an early age I decided I wasn't gonna get hung up on "Oh, I have to be femme as fuck." Alina Malletti, the drag queen you met in San Jose, was one of the people who couldn't clock me. She just could not believe that I wasn't just another queen. She even followed me around. She was posting me for a good six months to a year trying to figure it out. "She's not trans, I'ma catch her doing something crazy."

But these gurls are crazy. I mean, they run around in ten- and fifteen-thousand–dollar dresses and get sponsored by a bar. Child, I could never find a bar to support me. They told me I was too lippy, and too bitchy, and too big, and too, like, *whatever,* and I just go, "That's my stage name—Miss T-O-O."

Alina found a gurl to make me a gown in San Diego and she hand-beaded this thing for me. The thing weighed fifteen fucking pounds, all the beads she put on this bitch, and the day before, I said, "This is too much. I ain't doing this fucking shit." It was years before she was even talking to me again. "I covered the fees to get you in there!" I said, "Well, I never told you I was sure I was gonna do it." And I'm sorry, I gotta get made up and get out after I been working all day? "Makeup? What the fuck is that?"

Growing up, it was a rough time, mentally, physically, and emotionally. Kids go through rough times when they're young if they're trans or not trans, but it's especially hard for the gurls. Like when I was seeing a psychiatrist at the Bridewell House of Detention in Chicago, when Mother dragged me there and told them I was crazy. The

psychiatrist says, “We’re going to give you this test, I’m gonna say a word and you tell me something that comes to your mind.” Well, I just frustrated the shit out of him over that, because he was like, “apple,” or “car.” In my head, when I think about “apple,” I think about the smell of an apple pie and the cinnamon, you know, and I can sit there and smell it and feel it—and he said, “What are you doing?” “Oh, I’m thinking about the pie. And then you mentioned cars,” like—“Oh, ’56, yellow, convertible Cadillac with the big white wheels and the white steering wheel.” And I’m *moving.* He told my mother, “Uh, he’s *your* problem.” She found a hospital that took me right away, to get the gay outta me. And it’s happened since I’ve been grown, too. My parents tried to commit me when I got out of Sing-Sing; Mother had burned all my dresses. Maybe I deserved it. I *did* ruin all her shoes.

My fear was always that my kids wouldn’t have friends because of me, you know, so I always tried to stay in the background and let them be out, you know, in front, and as it turned out, it wasn’t their friends I ever had to worry about, it was their friends’ parents. That’s who gave us the shit, and they didn’t do it to my sons—thank God—they came over and confronted me, you know, which I was prepared to deal with. My parents felt that as a transgender woman I shouldn’t be within eight feet of a child. So when Christopher was really young, my folks tried to step in with, “Oh, well you’re raising this kid to be your lover.” And I go, “That sounds really interesting, but I don’t do black guys.” After they retired, they moved to the East Bay, to Menlo Park, in part because they thought the state would agree that a transgender person was unfit to take care of a child. They waited until I was at their house to try to take him from me, legally, and I had to climb out the back window. It was crazy, but what could I do but laugh at it and keep on moving?

TM And wasn’t it your mom who brought you to your first drag show?

MM It was both my parents. I remember when my parents took me for the first time to see the Jewel Box Revue when it was on tour in Chicago. And in the middle, when they took the intermission, Mother took Cookie and me out of there because I was having *way* too much fun. Who knew that five years later, I’d be performing there myself. From running around in my mother’s shoes all the time and bending the heels

back because of her little feet, I could walk in a pair of heels like a motherfucker, so I learned to sit and spin. The bars are one thing—the Jewel Box Revue was an entirely different thing. Because there were acts—there was the opening act, a performer, a comedian, a big act, then a dance team. And all of us were just dick-swinging motherfuckers in a dress, except for Stormé DeLarverie. He was the emcee. And a fine ol' yellow motherfucker. Gurls just chased him like crazy and then got disappointed cuz he didn't have no dick. "It says 'one-woman show' on the posters, and he's it. What did you expect, stupid?"

Anyway, it was years later that I locked down the job. My dad bought me an old car when I was a junior in high school. Some beater. So I was driving home, and the little straight boy I used to hang out with tells me, "I've heard that fag show is at the real theater." "Really?" "Yeah, the Jewel Box Revue." "Oh, oh, *here?*" "We should go check it out." So we went in and checked it out. At the backstage door was this really big queen, who was the comedian of the show. She was such a loving, sweet, dear, just a wonderful—just *embracing*. And so I pulled up and I was talking to her. And she was telling me how the show was doing and what was going on. And then she tells me, "Well, you're tall, so you couldn't be a dancer. But you *could* be a showgurl." "I could?" I said, "I'll think about it." She said, "Well, come back and talk to me. And we'll see." So for a week, I kept going back. And then one day one of the showgurls slipped and broke her ankle. "So if you want, I'll go talk to the bosses, have you come in, and you take her role for the last two days that we're here." Baby, I ran home, changed my clothes, snuck out my bedroom window and went back. They had me walk to music, sensually, in front of a bunch of people. And my tune went, "You are so beautiful … shining in the night" ["You Are So Beautiful" by Billy Preston]. And my outfit was covered in stars. And feathers shot from my hips, and I had a tail. You learn to balance these four-foot hats, and sometimes there'll be a rod here that's heavier than the rest of your outfit. You just hold on to the rod so the gown doesn't come off, and then you have to come down three flights of stairs, no stops, looking at the audience the entire time. And then, depending upon what number you are, you go left or right. And you walk back across the stage, back around to the pillar, and stop. Then you go back to the center, and then go take your final position.

TM Way more complicated than a runway show.

MM Oh, *honey*. Now that I wear a bra, my strap stretches, but there was a time I said, “Oh, if I wore a bra, I could’ve gone to Hollywood.” The other women there kept asking me, “How’d you do that?” And the people running the show said, “We’re leaving Chicago tomorrow, and we’re going to Memphis. If you get here by two o’clock, we’ll take you with us.” And that’s when my mother came backstage and pitched a bitch. “I saw my son up there, and you *motherfuckers*, he’s underage and he shouldn’t be doing this shit, and I’ma call the police. My brother’s a cop! I’ma get him down here.” And they ran and told me, “This lady is down here really giving us a hard time.” I asked, “Is she tall or short?” He says, “She’s only about *this* tall.” I go, “Yep, it’s my mother.” I ran home before she got to me. And just as I was trying to pack, I’ll be damned if my mother didn’t catch me going out the window, and sat in my room with me the whole night, right in front of the window. So I finished my senior year, pissed off the whole time, went to Minnesota to go to school, got shown the door, went back to Chicago, and tried to go to the Loop Junior College in Chicago. Got read there too, and never graduated the trade school program. Learned enough to get into data entry, working on these huge IBM computers that churned out rolls of paper, the size of wallpaper. For a few months, I worked for this oil company, Standard Oil. Being a sissy, of course I would wear lime-green suits with white ties, and these big fedora hats. They told me, “You know, you’re a little too loud to be in here, so pick up your check on Friday.” Next time I was headed for New York, I was living on the North Side of Chicago, away from my folks. And before I left, I went to their house to show them that I had found out who I was going to be. At this point I’ve been on hormones about seven or eight months and had little nubs of titties. So I went there and I flashed my mom, and my mom fainted—*oop!* Daddy kicked me out. “Don’t you dare show up in our doorway again.” I took everything I owned and put my clothes in one bag, and took a little makeup bag, plus a hatbox for my wigs. It seemed like I was waiting an hour and I couldn’t get a cab to stop, so I said, “Fuck it.” I stole a car.

TM No shit.

MM Yep. It was a 1959 Pontiac Bonneville station wagon. I throw all my shit up in the back. Then go to Thomasina's, and she ran up, titties leading. She jumped in and she said, "Let's go! If we can get to the airport in time to check all our luggage, we can ride with the gurls from New York." "Oh, gurl, we gotta hurry." *Pew!* And then … I got pulled over for speeding.

TM No!

MM Thomasina and I ended up getting jail time. She only got three months. They gave me six, but she wouldn't even talk to me. "You got me here! I've never even been arrested!" I said, "Don't blame me. It was going to happen eventually."

When I got out, I didn't have anything. I went to my parents' house. And they were so happy to see me because of course I hadn't shaved and I looked scruffy and I wasn't getting hormones and my tits were gone. They were just *thrilled*. My sister and I were talking and in front of everyone she says, "So is the gurl still in there?" I said, "Uh-huh, yeah. I'm gonna tell *you*, just so you can go tell Mother." She goes, "I'm so sorry—but Mother scared me, and I was afraid what she was gonna do." "OK, well now *I'm* gonna whip your ass." It didn't get to that point—Cookie helped me steal some money from them so I could take the *bus* to New York this time.

TM A lot of people would've given up way earlier in that story. And they do. Give up on life! The suicide rate among trans people is higher than —

MM Anyone.

TM And yet every time I drive you to the doctor, they always ask the same question—which I guess is standard practice. They ask you, "Have you been depressed or do you have a history of depression?" And you always answer immediately: "No."

MM No! I've never been a depressed person. But I've lived with and lost people around me because of depression, and it's made me consider what depression can do to a person. Cookie committed suicide in 1977,

the same Thanksgiving that the Jonestown Massacre happened. After losing my sister, when Daddy said, “Oh, Cookie took the easy way out,” I lost it. I went into *Mister* Major mode. Because what she did, that’s not easy—I believe we all come into this world with a desire to live, and so I thought of the pain she must’ve been going through to get to that point. I know when I started life, I was two months premature, and who knows what kept me going. I was gay early on, I realized that, and the fight began.

TM “Gay,” or “queen”—that’s what you called yourself initially.

MM Yeah. What’d I know? I’m falling in love with men. Let’s fight this battle and see if I can get ’em. It’s worked out just fine, so far. But if you don’t take the time to figure out what it is you want to do, and by that I mean who *you* is, that will get in the way. If you don’t take time to enjoy yourself, whatever creature that “self” may be, you won’t get very far.

6

LATE-NIGHT EPIPHANIES WITH BIG BLACK FROM ATTICA

TM You were locked up at Dannemora when you heard about the Attica prison rebellion, in ’71. In solitary confinement, your neighbor was Frank “Big Black” Smith, this iconic Black Panther and organizer of the Attica rebellion who managed to come out of it alive. The government had taken the living and spread them out to different prisons and put them in solitary, to dissolve potential organizing among the prisoners. What were you doing just before that time, after Stonewall but before Dannemora?

MM Well, his name was Tex and he was 6’4”. Tallest guy I’ve ever been with—*willingly*.

TM You’re into shorter guys.

MM You’re learning. Anyway, I could drive really good, so I got going with him to the Catskill Mountains and checking in at resorts. And then we’d go to dinner in the evenings. Since it’d be night, I could throw my shit on, walk in there, have all the heads turn, and while I was walking in to eat and sitting down, he would zip off and break into the safes in the offices. It was so cool.

And then someone recognized him from being there a couple years before with somebody else, and spooked him. We had heard the cops were looking for this couple. And so he said, “I got you a room. We gotta split.” I said, “Well, OK. Do you wanna take the stuff, or I take the stuff?” He said, “You take it.” So I said, “OK, well, we can’t use the car that we got.” So we went to a car dealership and told them, “We’ll just take this car for a test drive.” And so he drove it off the lot, we changed cars, loaded it up. I was gonna drive to New York, he was gonna take the bus.

Driving to New York, I got nervous and started to *fly*. Got pulled over. And they said, “Well, follow us to the police station.” I said, “OK!” It’s hilly, you know. So they went up, I’m coming down, they went down, they looked back, I was right there. They went up this next one and went down. I was at the bottom, turned around, I was off! And they chased me. Went through seven roadblocks. I drove right through them.

Then I ran right into the back of a truck. I remember it was a Humboldt Oil Refinery truck, because I remember seeing the big “B” and I thought, “That ‘B’ is awfully wide,” ‘cause the oil tank in back was round. Just before I hit it. I think I was going ninety miles an hour. I remember falling to the side and watching the steering wheel float past me. I hit, and the car slid underneath the back of the truck. I thought it was going to explode. I passed out. Thought I was dead. When I came to, I was cold, and I was on the concrete. It was black, and I thought, “Oh, I died. God’s gonna send me to West Hell.” And then suddenly it got really, really bright, and I blinked or jumped or something, and I heard this guy say, “Well, this Black motherfucker is still alive!” and he started kicking me—which I couldn’t feel! You know, I was just numb. I couldn’t feel anything—but I remember just jerking.

Then somebody else came over and he said, “Well, you can’t leave him like this. Take the motherfucker and put him in an ambulance.” Fell out again. Woke up in the hospital. Yeah, I got five years for that. So that’s how I wound up in Dannemora.

Dannemora is a prison, but next door to it is Dannemora State Hospital, where they put us so-called lunatics. I had red hair and titties and arched eyebrows, so that’s where they sent me first. I was like, “OK, fine.” After they decided that I was not going to admit to being

crazy, they sent me over to the prison side. Then Attica happened, and right after the government went in and killed everybody, they were shipping people all over to different prisons and stuff. I went from Dannemora the hospital to Dannemora the prison, and then to the hole. They put me there for throwing water on one of the guards, because if the guards knew you were one of the queens, they would just come up to your cell and lay their dick on the bar, and expect you to just open wide. One day I wasn't feeling it. In the morning they brought little cups of warm water to wash your face. I took it and threw it on the guard. I got three months in the hole, and so I happened to be the sissy down the cell-block from the men they brought in from Attica. I got to meet Big Black and all these wonderful brothers who had started this rebellion and talk with them for those months. And listen to them being beaten up every day, listening to the guards put cigarettes and cigars out on these fellas. And you never, never forget the smell of burning flesh. It never ever leaves you. Never leaves you. It just broke my heart that that was happening.

It was a rough time, but I've told some of the gurls, "I know you aren't all going to understand this being so young, but you can be in the deepest, darkest fuckin' hole, and something can make you smile, or laugh." And the thing is to appreciate those things. And as horrible and tragic as that time was, something small would light you up. Like, one day getting a chance to see all except for one of the brothers. They had to walk past my cell to take a shower, and usually the guard would make me stand up and face the wall. This time the guard wasn't paying attention, and Black came over and patted my hand, and he said, "You have such pretty hands." I said, "I think so too. It's my best feature."

Black is the one that talked to me the most. He had such a marvelous brain. And in all of that, he still took the time to talk to me. The first question Black asked me was "What do you go by? What's your name, baby?" He's the one that let me know that during things like the riot or getting justice done—stuff like that—*you can't throw anybody under the bus*. You can't leave anybody behind. And that's become my favorite thing to say to people: I won't throw anybody under the bus, and I'm not leaving anybody. It has to include us all, or it's not going to work. It was mind-altering. It was like that epiphany that rings a bell in your brain. *Bong!* That's what it did. And so I've

spent the next forty years trying to find out what bell I can set off to wake up my community. We used to just sit and talk late into the night and stuff. And before I left there, he had sent me some poems that he wrote and stuff, for what he thought my heart was.

We talked about the race riots, and education, which can be a really a good thing, depending on your teacher. Because that's what white people want you to have—education. They want you to go to their school, listen to their hype, believe their *lies*, instead of hearing the truth and coming to a decision about who you are and what you're going to do. But you have to see the truth for yourself, learn it, and then believe it. Do what you need to do to survive. He said, "Now, you still want to go back out of here and start doing hooking and doing checks and stuff like that? Cool. Do it safely. Do it where you're protected. Don't share what you're doing with a lot of people, because if something happens to them, they're gonna rat you out, you're gonna go to jail, they're still gonna be free." Bingo. Because where was Tex? I never heard from him ever again.

People ask me, "Being an activist, when did it start?" Over time I've come to think about it differently, because it's a matter of more than just "It started when as an adult I noticed the injustices." I think that it starts for people when they're a child. Certain things that you do point you in that general direction, like looking out for kids in the park or being there to help your friends through stuff. I think that that's where it began, and then the thing that shook me up as an adult was my being at Attica, and of course as a young person I noticed there were differences about race and about class, and Money always did better than Not Having Money. That perspective of "Well, why is it that ten percent of the people have ninety percent of the money?" Something's wrong, you know what I mean? Because I remember hearing stuff growing up that the world's supposed to be fair, and everybody had an equal share. It's not equal, and it's not fair. So those are the things that I feel helped to gravitate people toward doing that kind of work as an adult. And then by being a transgender person, seeing those atrocities took me to a whole new level.

It's not what I did then that's important, *it's who I am now*. And who I'm trying to teach now, train now, get involved with stuff now. How I'm trying to make my community better, stronger, wiser, safer. You

know what I mean? And that I got that from Black, you know. A lot of times, like when I get an award about something, I think about him and smile. The number of people—brothers, Black men and women—who would think he never met anybody like me, that if he met me, he would not have liked me, that I'm this random fucking *thing* instead of seeing the person that I am—that's what he saw. He'd be talking to me and through the questions that I asked him about this stuff, he could see there was an interest, and he filled that.

TM Did you ever identify with a particular political ideology? Black had you reading *The Communist Manifesto*.

MM No, I didn't. No group. The organizations I've started up, and the projects I've worked on, they worked with certain aspects of *who I was at the time*. I would take what was useful for me and use it, but if it wasn't useful to me, I didn't bother.

TM The massive scale of organizing that Big Black was part of at Attica, with over a thousand prisoners involved in the uprising—in your conversations with him, did you talk about how hard that must have been to do, given the limitations of being inside a prison cell?

MM And those are?

TM The limitations? You would say that outside is not that different from inside in terms of organizing?

MM Well, look at it this way: It was easier in there because the guys were all objects of police brutality. So, if you were going to talk to them about what was going on, they were more receptive to it. So I wouldn't say it was harder—and in some ways it was easier in there than it is on the outside. Inside, it's not as though you have other things that are taking control of your interest. When Black started to give me books to look at or explain how things were, I was more receptive. When he taught me about how towns spring up after you put a prison somewhere, how the towns surround the prison and the prison sustains the town—and that's everything from clothing to what you can eat—I was more receptive. Most of the men—well, women now too—but most of the

men in the town worked in the prison, so they'd never be traveling too far. If they were, say, in upstate New York, they would put the prison close to the city. In Dannemora, they put a prison in what was basically a field, twenty miles from Canada. The thing about Black was, everything that he did was about putting the Black *person* first. He told me he saw me as "Major."

TM "Major," the individual.

MM Yeah. I was just Major, and then I was "Major, the Black person," and *then* I was "Major, the transsexual." He didn't put anybody aside, or talk to one out of a group and ignore the rest. And I feel that I knew it, at the time—I had an idea that it was the right way to approach organizing the gurls. At least, it didn't seem to me that that was so incorrect that it was wrong.

TM It helped to have him say it out loud for it to click.

MM Yeah. And so in looking at that idea of, well, everyone's a *human being* when it comes down to it, it opened your eyes to what was really going on at the time, the injustices. And he explained that it had been going on for *years* before. What he tried to teach us is "It's been going on for *at least* three hundred years." Three hundred years was a long time to wait and hold on, and be patient, and turn the other cheek, and he helped us to see that. And that's why when I think of Big Black at that time, I think: "My mentor. My love." He was the instrument for my politicization, and I think it's kept me alive and kept me going. We used to just sit and talk late into the night, and then before I left there, he had sent me some poems that he wrote, and as things happened, the poems wound up in storage, and I wound up getting busted for something small and not getting out in time to pay the storage, and then it just vanished. I even called my momma from jail: "Just pay that, please; that has stuff in there that I'm so emotionally tied to." And my mother's remark to me was "You have emotions?" and she hung up.

TM Sad. How did you meet Ceyenne Doroshow, Big Black's trans daughter?

MM I met her at the hookers' conference. The Desiree Alliance conference. She asked me a question while I was doing a speech, and we got to know each other, and from there she started calling me "Mama." As soon as we met. As *soon* as we met. She told me Black had been the first person to tell her she was trans—before she knew she was trans. And that it had to do with him knowing this gurl named Major back in the hole in Dannemora. So because of that connection we got closer, she came to visit me in California, and she started doing stuff in the community back in New York. If she sees a wrong somewhere, she would try to right it. And she has the qualities that's necessary. For the younger gurls one thing I'd hope to tell them is: What's required is you've got to be consistent. You must be. And when you're mentoring the gurls, and you're going to be somewhere at two o'clock, then you be there at two o'clock. You don't show up ten minutes later. [*She looks at me, whom she calls "Tuesday," a reference to a day we almost missed a flight because I slept through my alarm.*] And be ever present, you know, in case there's a time when they really need you.

With Black, as far as leadership goes, it was on you to decide what you could handle from your position. He taught us and told us that it was up to you to take what you needed and put the other stuff aside. It was the first time I'd realized I was in control in that way, and that I *could* put the other stuff aside. That idea came back into my consciousness when I was working with the gurls, and so I applied it with the gurls and it worked: to see that everybody, *everybody* has suffered. That one is luckier than the other—it doesn't do anyone any good to think like that, not if the idea is to get some kind of movement more than two-and-a-half inches off the ground. We *all* struggle.

III

THE KEYS TO OUR FUCKING SURVIVAL

7

NO MATTER HOW SMALL YOUR WORLD FEELS

TM After Dannemora, you needed some time. You didn't immediately go out and start organizing.

MM Uh, *no!* I had to get pretty first! Seriously, I came outta there a mess. I was twenty pounds, I had to get myself together. And it's important that I was behind the scenes at that point; I still had to sort out what I wanted to do, what was important to me in my life. And when I did, I took off. When I got out of Dannemora, a lot of gurls were hooking and coming up missing. So I talked to the gurls about it: "Look. This affects us. Whenever we see a gurl get in a car, let's write down the license number. There's ten of us out here—one of us is gonna get that license plate. And if you get a chance to see what he looks like, a little description of him won't hurt. So that the authorities can't say, 'Well, we have no way of knowing what happened to her,' " you know?

TM One of the things you tell gurls who come to you asking for advice is that trans gurls have to put up this "united front" against the Powers That Be.

MM Looking back now, when the Powers That Be have tokenized us—given the attention to one of the group by making them feel that "Well,

you are different, *you* are special”—they usually do that in order to turn the rest of us against that person. That way they keep us separate. If everyone got to thinking that everybody is the same, and that everyone deserves health care, a roof over their heads, a clean shower—it’s a hard thing for them to fight against. The drama separates us, so every time that happens, for the Powers That Be, we’re all distracted and they can go on with their plans. So for them, it’s like every day is Christmas morning. Spending too much time seething over the fact that some gurl wore the same color dress as you to a party, or some cis man who might be giving you a little bit of attention, or a boss that’s playing on the fact that no one wants to hire us. Yes, the uncertainty can be scary if you break up with that man or quit that job. But if I need money and shelter that bad, all I do is go suck a dick, get some cash to pay my rent, and *problem solved*. I’ve been in jail enough times with no bank account and no one to bail me out to understand that if you have the community around you, that sister-hood, those allies in your corner, then you’ll be alright in the end. Kids are kids before they become adults. My dog Gator was a son of a bitch when we fostered him. For trans gurls, our transition, it’s like going through adolescence all over again. But you have to know that there is good in there. I was young once. If you open your mind to your sisters, over time you realize that drama wasn’t all that important, and you can make a way, and move forward.

TM You had a friend in Chicago who mentored you, in a way.

MM It must’ve been 1957 or ’58. I lucked out one day and met this wonderful older lady by the name of Kitty. She worked at a club in town, and she used to perform at the shows there, and I thought, “Oh! I wanna do that—I wanna do shows!” And she explained to me that there’s a difference in how you present yourself between doing the shows, going home after the show, and shopping during the day. I would sneak off on Saturdays when I had free time and meet with her and talk with her. One Easter I was over at her place, and she said, “Didn’t you hear? I’m gonna dress you up for Easter and I’m gonna take you to a party that I go to.” She told me she’d show me what I *could* look like if I wanted to. So she told me, “Look, you came out tall. Flats ain’t gonna make you any less tall. You might as well wear the heels.” She brought

out a pair of three-inch heels, white satin opera pumps. Fucking gorgeous. And she said, “You know you’re Black, people that look at you are gonna know you’re Black, but you don’t have to wear brown hair. Wear whatever color that you feel.” She told me to try them on, see which ones fit, and what I like. And then she had this strawberry blonde and brown-tipped wig that she had me wear. She painted me and it didn’t take three hours like the other gurls did—she was done with me in like forty-five minutes. She put fake lashes on, which scared me half to death—I thought I’d be blind. Then after she got me dressed, she gave me a bra. And then she brought out this black satin cocktail dress. “And this is a dress for going out in the evening, you don’t wear this kind of dress in the daytime.” She fitted me and stuff and gave me this little fake body. When she finally told me, “Okay, you can go out there and look in the mirror,” I fell in love with me. It was like, *oh my God, I’m fucking pretty*! You know? I heard later when I went back to Chicago after moving to New York that she’d robbed some trick and she had to take off. Meeting her and getting to know her, it was an eye-opening experience, all of it.

TM In high school you met other nonbinary people for the first time. Where?

MM Oh gosh. I went to the library in downtown Chicago, and you went to the bathroom, and that’s where you met the, um, *weird* people.

TM Somewhere known through word of mouth.

MM Well, yes. It’s not like we had a cell phone with an app to tell you, “The boy is twelve feet away from where you are right now.” But the thing is, we’re everywhere, and we’ve been here the whole damn time. I believe in my heart that we’ve been here since Cain and Abel, you know? To me, Cain was one of the gurls, and that bitch Abel did something to bother her—like borrowed her shoes without asking—and Miss Thing killed her. Eunuchs were trans people. You know that saying in the Bible “Some are born that way, some turn that way”? Some are made that way. What way? Oh, us.

TM After your second stroke in 2019, people from around the world sent hundreds of cards to you that we kept in these binders at your house. For the cards that we sent back, you gave me very specific orders. I remember being at the hospital where you were going through physical therapy at the time. You couldn't write with your hands at the time, but you picked out the cards and the red lipstick I needed to buy, plus that Chantilly perfume to spritz the cards. You watched me practice writing your initials until it was satisfactory enough and then you had me put on the lipstick to kiss each one. It was sentimental in this way that was very *you*.

MM I didn't expect to be overwhelmed by all that, but it was so sweet I couldn't help but cry, especially the ones from the trans kids whose cards I framed and put up on the wall. That personal stuff is the most important, if you are going to mobilize people and keep them coming back.

TM There's just no way you could remember the name of everyone you meet, though you typically give your number out to anyone who meets you in person and tell them to call you if they need advice. A lot of them take you up on it, and they call you when they're going through a rough time.

MM What I do is love and care for my community, whoever they are. And if I can't get to them, hopefully there's somebody I know who can help them. And that's why I change my voicemails—I thought of the idea because of when I was in the Jewel Box Revue, and the Cherries, the doo-wop group the management eventually had me doing. We were supposed to be lip-synching to, I don't know, the Supremes or whoever was popular that month, and the other gurls would always mouth the words or some gibberish. But as long as I knew the tune, I figured why not sing along, because the way to lip-synch is to say the lyrics out loud. And memorizing them was a whole other thing, and my lyrics were off ninety-nine percent of the time. But people told me my voice was a comfort to them. It happened offstage and on. Anyway, the point is that with the phone calls, hopefully they can hear my voice, and know that if I don't call back right away it doesn't mean I'm not thinking of them.

And hopefully they can get some comfort from knowing I'm thinking about them, and that there's someone out there trying to look out for them, because a lot of my gurls, they didn't have a mom or a dad who didn't kick them out onto the street, or they had parents who harbored some kind of hatred toward them because they were trans. The Jewel Box was advertised on the posters as "one woman and twenty-five men," by which they meant one butch-as-hell lesbian drag king and twenty-five of us gurls.

TM And the "one" was the emcee, the hype man: Stormé DeLarverie, one of the other people you knew from being in New York and one of the more well-known Stonewall veterans.

MM Yes. Stormé brought me and some of the other gurls to the Stonewall on one of my first nights out in the Village, and during the shows he would introduce three of us gurls as the Cherries.

You don't want to berate the gurls when they mess up. You can read them. But you keep working with them so they don't mess up again. Because of my position, because of my age, I don't want to come down hard, or give them tough love, because we have enough tough shit happen to us in our lives as trans gurls. I want them to know that I believe in them, and that everybody makes mistakes. I make mistakes, and you just have to get over them and keep on going. And if they need help doing that, I'm there to help. I'm not there to condemn them, pass judgment, or ridicule them, at all. Now, if you want to read me, let's go at it, honey, cuz I'll read your ass. But in terms of doing it in such a way that it really tears any one of my gurls down, that's not what I'm here to do. And one of the things I feel fortunate about is that I'm one of the gurls who doesn't have a lot of enemies.

TM I know. Shockingly so.

MM There's no gurl who I pay attention to who's out to get me, and it's always been like that for me. The thing is that everything comes at a cost. The drama. Your anxiousness, your ego, all that stops you from being the best human being you can be.

TM I think about your surrogate daughter Kim Fromm—she has this hard surface that comes from dealing with cis people, prison, her family in Louisiana, even other gurls. She started using a cane after jumping off the second floor of the house of this guy she was seeing, who came for her with a knife when he figured out she was trans. When you first meet her, it seems like there's no softer side of Kim. But you got her out to TGI Justice events, and she gets really sentimental with you. She'll cry over the phone when she's talking to you. I've realized from spending time with you how one-on-one human connections are crucial to motivating people to change and move.

MM That ability, to lead and motivate people and help them do better for themselves and their community, that ability is in all of us. And I think the pleasure I get out of it is that I get to see it all happen. People like Kim, they might be kind of standoffish at first, but then after a while they just open up like flowers.

8

ALLIES, BE VISIBLE!

TM In San Diego you were with one of the loves of your life, Joe-Bob. He passed in ’95.

MM Yes. We’d moved to near where Joe-Bob’s family was. They weren’t happy with me being his significant other, but nevertheless we stayed there because with the HIV and the state he was in, he was too weak to travel far. Since he was a vet, he was in the VA Hospital during that time, and the VA Hospital was run by a bunch of conservative people who didn’t want to acknowledge that plenty of vets had AIDS. I made a fuss about it, and eventually they started what they called the “Special Disease Unit,” because fuck if they were gonna call it the “AIDS Unit.” And from spending all this time in the hospital, I got to know some of the other vets and their families and convinced a few of them that the government couldn’t just keep on hiding this secret of the military having people who had contracted HIV who were now dying because nobody wanted to acknowledge the problem. Then, about year in, I finally got them to make the little garden at the VA Hospital into a memorial for the people who died of the disease.

TM There’s a San Diego local TV newsclip of you at the dedication, where the newscaster says the garden is the work of “Joe-Bob’s ‘friend,’ Major,” and the look you give—

MM The look of doom. But the garden brought some comfort to the family members who were honest enough to acknowledge that this is a problem that is killing not just your son, but a whole community, and maybe you should do something to help end this.

TM A public health emergency like AIDS is like a natural disaster; it was on the scale of an earthquake. It demanded a response from the world, from allies, not just people who were directly affected by the crisis.

MM Because the truth is, there aren't a whole lot of us in the world. We don't have the numbers. So when people talk about this Trans Day of Visibility someone started a few years back—*what?!?* Whatever image they have in their head or however many surgeries they've had, for a lot of the gurls it's just a fact that on a dark night, a cisgender person could clock them from a mile away. It's our *allies* that need to be more visible. *You can't miss us!* We've been visible since time began, and as a result, for just as long we've been harassed, or something worse.

TM I don't even know if you watch any of those Hollywood award shows, like the Oscars.

MM Sure, I have.

TM When somebody makes a political statement onstage, which is rare, they usually get dragged.

MM You know what, I think they're trying to use what they feel is their power, or their voice, to create change, or bring in people with melanin in their skin and stuff like that. And I think that that's fine, because you have to do something with that voice. You never know, but you hope that somebody will hear it, and it'll change how they think.

TM When Marlon Brando asked a Native person to accept his Oscar in the '70s—

MM —yeah, to pick up his award. People were so upset! The Red Power people were taking over Alcatraz. There was a lot of political stuff going on in that regard. So it was a good thing to do. I mean, you

always have to challenge the status quo, or things won't change. And so it can be something simple. It doesn't always require that you put yourself in harm's way. I was taking care of my father in East Bay, in San Leandro, after he sold the house my grandmother had left him, in Menlo Park down near San Jose, and meanwhile working in San Francisco. I was at the house in San Leandro when they lit the cop cars on fire for Harvey Milk's assassination because the guy who shot him had connections—

TM Dan White.

MM He'd been a cop, then he went to work at city hall, so he got off easy. One of the gurls called me that night, all frantic. She said, "You won't believe it, the cop cars are all ablaze!" So I had to see for myself—drove as fast as I could and I got as far as when you're getting to where the freeway splits downtown, and the entire city had a glow to it, and the moon was the color of cheese in a can. They had these new baby blue patrol cars, just lighting up the sky, right in front of city hall. I had to turn that bitch around.

TM Why?

MM I was working two full-time jobs at the time and I figured, I'm gonna let the white gays and lesbians handle this. I was taking care of my dad and at the time it was the same as today as far as Black people being magnets for the cops.

TM Which is a problem that people who are supposed to be allies didn't get, and many of them still don't get.

MM Cops come, and the white people disappear into the night, and suddenly you're alone and the only one in cuffs on the ground.

TM In 2018 you went to the biggest gay nonprofit conference that happens every year, Creating Change, where they were giving you this lifetime achievement award. Before you flew out to DC, you got with one of our friends who's a Jewish anti-Zionist to figure out how to make a point about the genocide of Palestinians in Israel. It's the biggest conference

for gay nonprofits, all the executives from the corporate foundations and nonprofits are there, and for years the status quo has been to invite Israeli groups to be there in full effect but to reject Palestine-related panels and speakers. Why mention the issue during your speech?

MM It was simple: because the move to silence Palestinian liberation was wrong. Someone had to say something. So, me! You can't do this alone. We've got to band together. You must work with other people who have the same wishes and dreams as you do. We're *everywhere*, child. Who knows, maybe some gurl in Palestine is gonna be reading this when it comes out. With the suffering and the changes that they're going through and all this anti-trans shit happening, we have to work together with people who are at the bottom. We're not the only ones that are underneath people's feet. There's other people there too.

TM You went to Spain to testify before the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. When Jennifer Laude was raped and murdered by this US soldier in the Philippines, you spoke at this big meeting of the Filipinx feminist group GABRIELA. One of the first places you visited when you moved to the South from Oakland was the Japanese internment camp memorial in Arkansas.

MM People consider these struggles random. But they do connect, because once you've seen it, you can't unsee the abuse that these people go through on top of everything else. I want to show that it's all one thing. It doesn't matter what your skin color is, if you're Black, Brown; white people from Scotland, even, at some point had to suffer through all that bullshit. And came here, to the United States, separate under the rule of law. So, I want them to know, if they arrest some Japanese guy, they're arresting me. You know, they're beating them up, they're beating up me. That's why: It's a matter of general principle, and it includes everyone. When you go to that internment camp, it's just horrifying to see what they went through. We have to oppose that in every shape it might come.

TM My grandparents were there. My grandpa rushed towards assimilation after internment, but they both experienced it.

MM When you're going through something as mortifying as internment and detention, you have to believe that that stuff is temporary—unless you don't fight it. And when you fight it, make sure it covers everything.

When I went to Spain for that transgender conference, you won't believe how beautiful it was to see transgender women in their country's attire. I've seen these outfits on women in New York and San Francisco, but my point is, there's a certain confidence we trans women have in our ability to be just who we are, and then behind that the hurt and the pain and the suffering. We're smiling through that, and I think that emanates such a great feeling, if people would just take the time to stop and look at it to appreciate it, not point at it and laugh. If I have to be the one to make people stop for a fucking minute and look at a bitch and appreciate who she is, and what she had to go through to get here, then so be it. Over there, their problems are the same as ours over here—it's no different. Europe, Africa, Asia—it's all the same. Can't get jobs, can't get education, can't get housing, can't get training. We're not allowed to do anything but suck dicks, turn tricks, and they criminalize all of us. We all have something to offer, if they gave us the chance. If it means that I have to cuss out an auditorium full of motherfuckers one by one just to bring attention to it, I can do that.

9

DO WHAT YOU HAVE TO DO TO SEE THE NEXT DAY

TM It feels like you've worked almost every job in your lifetime. Assistant at a morgue, sex worker, driver of the needle exchange van in the Tenderloin, a surrogate mom for gurls in and out of the system when you were at TGIJP. A lot of the jobs, like the drop-in center director at TARC, they didn't exist until you created them. At TARC in the early nineties, you demanded that the nonprofit use some of its money to help the gurls on the street, who were some of the people who were most affected by HIV, and you started the drop-in center. I know you were a truck driver for a minute when you moved to California—

MM Honey, name a job and I've probably done it. Maybe got fired from it, but I've gotten by. When I got to New York, my aunt got me a job at the Goldwater Memorial Hospital where she was a nurse. Of course, I only lasted three paychecks. And the same thing happened when I was working the call center at PG&E [Pacific Gas and Electric Company, a Californian gas and power provider] in San Francisco. Once upon a time I worked at a clothing boutique where they fired me, and their reason was "We can't have that kind of behavior in a place of business," and that the behavior I exhibited as a trans person was "vile and disgusting." And because a lot of the jobs I did, they weren't considered "legitimate," by the time I was old enough to get social security—it's so

funny. I went to the Social Security Office, brought my ID, waited in line, finally my number's called, and I go into the office in back. And the girl, I'm watching as she gets up from her desk, goes to another girl at another desk, and she's got my information and they just look *confused*. And both girls, they go to get another girl, who finally comes back with them to ask me, "Griffin-Gracy?" "Yeah?" "You're gonna get *one hundred and seventy-five dollars* for the rest of your life."

TM A month? Damn.

MM A few times, I went with some people dressed up, we went out to JFK [John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York City] to boost suitcases. This was before they had wheels, so those bitches were heavy! People who flew at the time usually had to have some money to get on the plane in the first place, so there'd be at least *some*thing you could sell. One time one of the gurls picked a suitcase, and once she got it back to the city, opens it up and it's *ten thousand dollars*. And we worked under the table at the clubs on Friday and Saturday nights. Paid nothing compared to hooking. Starting at midnight, I'd come up from the station at Eighth Street and Thirty-Fourth Avenue—actually, that's where I was the night before going into Stonewall, I had a trick there—or if I was coming from some other part of town, I'd take the subway to Seventh and West Twenty-Ninth. And work 'til just before the sun came up. Rain, shine, sleet, snow, hurricane. And all down Broadway you could just taste the rainbow. The boys were over on Park Avenue, where I used to go and feast my eyes and hang out if it was a slow night. Seventh Street was gurls on hard drugs and the cisgender females and gurls with sex changes. Eighth was the alcoholics. Ninth Street was more like a potluck, God only knows what. I had a gurlfriend who used to work on Ninth. And her name was Pretty Linda. And Linda was thirty miles of bad road, but the sweetest queen ever. I would just shudder, "How could you be over there?" And she said, "Gurl, that's where you make good, good money." If you were pretty and you went over there, you didn't make no money. They would pass you and Pretty Linda would come back with a whole month's rent. It was so amazing to watch it happen. Linda was one of those gurls who was just nice and filled you in on the data, told you where to stand, which johns to look

out for, and it's through her I learned to help watch the gurls who were hookin'. We needed to be careful, because people were gettin' beat up a *lot* then. Take down the license plate number if we see a gurl get in a car that you feel kind of iffy about, and as good a description as you can, in case something happened. "Well, I saw her get in the car. This is the time, this is the license number, this is the make and model of the car, and this is what the guy looked like." Linda helped me get to that point, to get the gurls together and eventually worked it out so one of the gurls would be the lookout, and we'd each give her some of what we made that night.

TM Cop-watching.

MM Sure, you could call it that. And for nights that they got to you, as a Black person, I learned a trick when I was little: When you get in a situation with a cop, do something that pisses him off enough to knock you out. Otherwise, if they don't knock you unconscious, they keep beating your ass till they hear a bone or two break, and you could end up dead. I spit in some cop's face, and he knocked my Black-ass out cold. Brought my limp body straight to jail.

TM What about pimps?

MM I was always independent—I never had a pimp or a particular john or a boy to look out for me. We looked out for each other. Working the street, the only way we survived is each other.

TM What would you use to protect yourself?

MM At a certain point you pay it no mind. When I moved to the South, the first outfit I bought was that camouflage sweatsuit. It's supposed to help you blend in. They lied. And I need you to call the DMV here. I still haven't heard anything about my plates.

TM OK. Given that it's been over a year, I'm not sure it's gonna happen. But I can call again. [*The California vanity plates on Major's old Cadillac read TSCUGR; her application for TRNSGDR has been pending with the DMV in Arkansas since 2018.*]

MM Back when I was hooking, probably my *favorite* weapon was a garbage can.

TM I know it's possible to make a weapon out of anything, but explain.

MM This was before rubber trash cans; they used to make the trash cans out of metal. And I always carried a switch with me. And so if you were between johns and you had five minutes, you cut the lid of the trash can so the bottom part of the lid is like a row of teeth. And then it fit right back into the bottom part of the can, and you could just reach over and grab it anytime. You survived. You did what you had to do. And then when they finally let us work a so-called respectable job at the hospitals when AIDS started, because a lot of the medical staff was scared and refused to treat people at that time, you put up with misgendering and them not letting you wear makeup.

If people are going to understand and work with us, they need to know that it's not easy to jump up and walk out that motherfucking door *knowing* I may not get back to it. Just because of some idiot I could run into, getting gas or walking into a store to buy something, who goes, "Wait—that's one of those tranny motherfuckers!" And *BAM!*

TM After the shooting at a high school in Parkland, Florida in 2018, one of the news channels asked you to comment. They were looking for an activist voice and called you, presumably because they figured you were pro-gun control. I politely declined for you.

MM Well, I can't tell the gurls whether or not they should go out and get a weapon. The catch is, ninety-nine percent of the time, even if you have a gun, and it comes down to the point where you have to defend yourself, who's going to jail, whether or not you were simply using it to defend your life? The trans person. The thing is, they've militarized the police departments, and who are the police coming for? It's the Black people. And if they're not Black, it's the Native American gurls, it's the Latin American gurls, who most likely did not grow up in a penthouse north of Fourteenth Street. One of the reasons Alex started TIP in the first place was that Gwen Araujo had just been murdered. Some of the guys who were having her on the down low killed her. The lawyers kept

misgendering her and insisted that Gwen had deceived the men into having sex with her.

TM The “trans panic defense.” So sometimes it’s about survival, not politics.

MM Until I can be sure that every single police officer in this country trades in his gun—all his guns—for one of the little sticks they give them in England, I can’t tell the gurl out there—who has to look over her shoulder anytime she leaves the house anyway—“Don’t worry about it, everything’s fine,” when in reality it’s open season on my community three hundred and sixty-five days a year.

IV

MISS MAJOR FUTURISM

10

MISS MAJOR FUTURISM

MM Did you see it? Someone sent me an article about how there's a doctor who figured out that the first person to live to one hundred and fifty has already been born.

TM You're going to outlive me, for sure. I think I'd get bored if I lived to one-fifty. You wouldn't?

MM No. I was just explaining to someone why I can sit and watch the same program, TV or movie, five or six times in a row. Because every time I see it, I see it differently. And that I take all of those things, and I keep them in my head. And when I'm out and I see things, I'm still a curious person. And you have to be open to learning new things as life goes on, especially as an older person. Most of us are pretty set in our goddamn ways. But if you get set in some way, then you can't move forward, you know what I mean? And I don't want my feet in concrete. Even if they're slow, I want to be able to *slide* and move forward.

Look, I'm older but I still have my shit together. Some people refuse to believe it, but older people, we still have sex. And I think that people need to know that, because over half the people in this country are gonna be over fifty soon. There isn't the care there for us that there needs to be, or the open-mindedness.

TM So many trans people still don't come out until they're older. If there was access to health care and living wages, it might be easier.

MM They might not have to wait until forty-five to start to go through their adolescent phase.

TM Speaking of age, half your friends are half your age.

MM Yeah, and the other half are hanging on by a vein and two heartbeats per minute. But those are the people society overlooks. And those are the people who go unnoticed. Think what would happen to the Powers That Be if you got all the kids in middle school, high school, and all the old people together, because not all of them are buying into this shit we're fed.

A lot of women treat getting older as if it's a bad thing. But when younger people call me mother, or grandmother, I feel as though it's an honor. To them, it's like, "Here's an older trans woman who survived, and who's out there still raising hell." Elders can teach the younger people to pick up the fight. In my mind it's what they must do. When you are constantly under attack, especially if you're in this community, you can't just retire and walk off into the sunset. You've got to stay and teach young people to fight.

TM The second question people ask you, after the inevitable question about Stonewall, relates to your sense of the larger horizon for social transformation, about how you picture the future. What does your utopia look like? What's the future you imagine?

MM I'm sick of that question, too. Do I look like a psychic?

TM OK, but since I've known you, you've had plans and you *are* thinking about the future, and that vision obviously has worked out, in some kinda way. You inspire me and a lot of other people to believe we might make it if we have a community, even though it feels like some great world-ending catastrophe is upon us. Gurls still talk about how they feel fortunate when they live past thirty-five.

MM I don’t know what’s gonna happen tomorrow. But I’m here, so I might as well fucking enjoy it, and help my community if I can. I would hope that the future is a place where there’s less emphasis on surgery and gender markers. I would hope that someone would step away from this book recognizing that “transgender” does not encompass just one type of person.

It’s a battle just to be who we are and be respected for what we’ve done, and it does feel often like there’s no end in sight. There’s no way to knock off all those who are in a position of power. These structures, it’s not a matter of just killing those on top—and even if it were, how’s that going to work? They always have a bull’s-eye on our foreheads, and they’ll pull a trigger when it serves them. They need to be constantly reminded that we can see their bullshit. Motherfuckers, I’m half-blind and I can see it.

People should be doing anything they can to shake down the status quo. And we need to be remembering that when we’re dealing with the Powers That Be, it doesn’t hurt to ask for more. If you manage to get to someone from the upper crust of society, take that chance for all it’s worth. Whatever it is you’re asking for, ask for more. Sometimes, they’ll try to get away with giving you something you can’t actually live off of, because at some point the motherfuckers decided the thing to do was to give dead trans women a bronze plaque in the sidewalk and call it a day. Just like the one outside Compton’s Cafeteria in the Tenderloin. You wouldn’t know it was there if you tripped and fell and it hit you in the middle of your forehead. So if they try to pull that shit, what you do is say, “Woo—thank you very much, that’s so very nice of you, but the thing is I don’t know anyone who’s ever lived on a plaque.” That plaque better be the size of a two-bedroom apartment. Instead of a plaque in the sidewalk, how about the building next to it? Because landlords don’t want to rent to my community in the first place, and paying rent today you’re talking about three or four jobs, with three or four roommates, just to afford a little place where you can lay your head down to rest.

TM You’ve said how technology and social media has isolated people who could be comrades and caused drama because someone takes something the wrong way and differently than if they were speaking face-to-face. When I first heard you say that, I was like, the kids in the audience

might assume, “Oh, she’s in her seventies so of course she’s resistant to technology—can she work a cell phone?” But your reasons are deeper than that, and you work an iPad better than a lot of people my age, in fact. You’ve done your time on Tumblr and Rentmen.com.

MM Rentmen should pay *me*. It’s true about the technology. With certain things, “progress,” it’s like, let’s think about the bigger picture.

Before the COVID pandemic, some motherfucker had a plan to turn Whitney Houston into a hologram and take the bitch out on tour. That’s just sad. She went through enough while she was alive. Let the bitch rest! This *thing*, it looks like her—you almost can’t tell it’s a computer that created that thing. They’re not going to need people anymore. I think about the Industrial Revolution: that progress was nice if you were a Rockefeller, but it was so devastating for the rest of us as human beings. There were times in my life where to pay the bills and being a single mom, I drove a cab. I’ve driven a truck up and down California, and the needle exchange van in the Tenderloin. Sometimes hooking doesn’t pay *all* your bills, so you’ve got to fill in the blank somehow. Now they want to put self-driving cars on the road. All of those cabdrivers and the rest won’t be needed. So what they call progress is not usually progress.

When I was sucking dick on Seventh Avenue, I wasn’t thinking about the next day. And sex work was a *job*. One that I happened to like, but nevertheless. In the sixties they used to say it was a time of “free love.” Me and the rest of the gurls down on the Avenues were just like, “Oh god, what are the hookers gonna do?”

A lot of the time, I’d be in the back seat of some john’s car, maybe he was a cop who I had to suck off or else I’d get arrested. So I was in my head, remembering what I saw earlier that day. When I lived in New York, if you had a pair of binoculars, the world was your TV screen. And now it’s just gone. I remember hearing from some older gurls at the time that everybody in the world crosses some part of 42nd Street at some time in their life. And it always seemed like that. Now, today, I don’t really go out like that, but if there was a way to bring back the feeling of that time—not the place, but the feeling—that’s a future I can be down with.

One of the things I hear with some younger trans people I know is they feel, “I’m gonna get this surgery, and I’m gonna learn that way of speaking, and I’m gonna be done.” You’re never done. If you’re a straight, cisgender person, you’re never done. Things are always happening that have the potential to change you. So all I am today is not who I’m gonna be tomorrow, because of the things that happened to me today and later tonight. People forget that. “Oh, after I transition, I’m gonna be through.” Well, good luck with that. ‘Cause if you’re through, then it’s time to leave, you know, and I don’t wanna go anywhere yet.

I’m in my seventies. Why didn’t I stop? Number one is community. My gurls. I’ve had moments of thinking about stopping, but I didn’t. I made sure I would step back, rejuvenate myself, and then got back out there, and that’s how you make a way. Our stories are not all the same, but the destination is: to get some place where we have some peace and harmony, and we can be at ease with ourselves and the people around us. You make the best of it all and hope you can help make it a little better for the gurl after you.

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