

# Fucking Cis Men

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## Dear Reader,

Early in transition, two memoir essays fell out of me effortlessly. The first, *Transvestite Geography*, was a remembrance of my days cross-dressing in the last years of Portland's bohemia. The second, *Details of Lost Time*, was a remembrance of my days tagging along with TERFy dykes in the Ani DiFranco tour scene. Both essays were a way for me to reclaim that time. Tell a different story. Remind myself that I'd always wanted *this*, even when it seemed impossible.

The genesis for *Fucking Cis Men* was different. Having written about old trans communities and old lesbian communities I realized that a third zine was just sitting there, waiting to be written. However, I was less enthusiastic about revisiting my time among the gay and bisexual men of Generation X.

Then two books came to my attention. Leo Herrera's (*Analog*) *Cruising* and Marcus McCann's *Park Cruising*. The first, a memoir, recounts Herrera's adventures and exploits over the years while laying out the rules and culture of public cruising for a younger generation. McCann's book is part political history, and part meditation on the positive things public cruising communities can do for their participants.

Both books tell true stories, are well written, and are worth your time, but as I finished them I found myself frustrated by missing perspectives. It's true, as Herrera sells us, that a full embrace of our desires can be liberating and it's true, as McCann reminds us, that legal attacks on these spaces are an assault on general liberty and should be stopped, but neither book lingered long on how awkward these spaces can be, or how lonely and furtive they were in the Reagan and immediate post-Reagan years in America. Lip service was paid to how these spaces were also frequented by trans people but how that went for them was left out. I didn't see me – and that meant I had my way into the project.

Once I was back in these years the rest came like a flood, and I was reminded why I didn't want to, but needed to, revisit this era.

This is an unflattering work. I'm not proud of the way I treated myself, allowed myself to be treated, or treated the others around me. If aspects of sex with men or sex with aggressive people are complicated for you please be ready to put it down.

Alana Storm

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late with a little middle-aged restraint.

Besides, a younger me would have grown tired of an ongoing tryst not going anywhere, and if I had been the young woman I wanted to be – twenty? thirty? – years ago this sort of thing probably would have been a business transaction.

I wonder about you D—. A boy on the verge of middle age still drifting through life on bohemian sails. The near-empty, but clean, ghost apartment. Your intense, but respectful, attraction to trans women. I think my biggest regret about the ghosting is I don't get to peel that onion back – but then, I suppose that's your business and not mine.

Whatever that afternoon was for you – thank you for showing me it could be different than the old days, and reminding me that anything I want can be mine.

*lost in the high street  
where the dogs run  
roaming suburban boys*

(1989 – Amherst, NY)

Leave the house, take a left, and then another left onto Brian Ave. Pass Sagewood, Teakwood, Shetland, Patrice, and Palmdale to reach the Dannybrooke apartment complex. Trespass – head back and to the right. Follow the wire fence until it stops. There’s a door-sized gap between it and a second wooden fence. An affordance allowing residents and children access to the back ally of the shopping center.

Continue south to your first stop, Transit Lanes. A bowling alley with a small arcade. Drop some quarters, play some video games, and then continue south, crossing Transit Road when the traffic clears. Continue under the Sheridan Drive overpass. Cross the parking lot for the old Sheridan Court Motel, and head southwest until you reach your final destination – Eastern Hills Mall.

Work your way through the zig-zagging corridors at the height of mall culture. Walden Books, Cavages, National Record Mart. The ubiquitous arcade across from the cinema (drop a few more quarters), Electronics Boutique, the engraving shop that sold zippo lighters, KB Toys, the Harvest House Cafeteria with its mid-century vibe, the Woolworths video games section that sometimes had an NES setup for free play. The poster shop, and finally the food court.

I was.

How quickly after that my dress fell to the floor.

You were there, no need to rehash details, save one. That moment halfway through where you gently cupped my breast in your hand and told me my body was beautiful. And how, most remarkably of all, I believed what you were saying.

I sent you my number and smiled as I left – you pulling those skinny jeans back on preparing for work. I floated on the walk back to my car, basking in the power of this new body, and reflecting on the ways I can chase desire with so much less conflict in my heart. I pass a woman my age and we smile at each other – I make up a story that she recognizes my just fucked hair and approves with a touch of envy.

I was – disappointed – when I didn’t hear from you. A rookie move I suppose. Sending my number instead of getting yours. The disappointment multiplied when your Grindr account stayed silent, unchecked, and eventually deleted.

I imagine myself a younger woman, and being angry about this ghosting rejection. Quietly stalking out your building, arranging a chance meeting. Occasionally there are benefits to having arrived

I smiled when I realized you lived in one of those early 20th-century apartment buildings that still dot Northwest. A three-story walk-up – built in 1927 so not a part of the Lewis and Clark exposition but instead a part of the housing boom that came after the war but before the depression. Later the internet will tell me the name of its architect, and I idly wonder if Mrs. Augusta Z. McClain ever brought a lover up these stairs she designed.

Your apartment was a classic studio, with a nook kitchen and some built-ins. A single bed and small end table, no couch or other furniture, but the bed did have a frame. Your canvases leaned against the walls.

Do you remember when you took off your hoodie and I caught a glimpse of your tattoos? And you noticed me noticing and pulled your shirt off for a better look. My hand reached out instinctively towards the beauty of your bare chest and its black ink. The kindness in your voice when you said it was OK to touch, the pride in your voice as my hand lingered on the eagle and snake and you talked about your father coming to the states – you mention a year and in my head I calculated his immigration as eight years before you were born, and three years after

Continue out through the Sears, stopping at their computer games section and display case with the pewter miniatures. If you're bold and the weather's nice – leave the mall and cross the access road to the plaza with Child's World (another toy store) and the Hills department store. Cross Main Street to Transit Town Plaza and be disappointed that nothing interesting has opened. Reach the end, turn around, and head back the way you came.

Do this suburban trek enough and you start to learn where the public restrooms are. The obvious ones – like the mall food court, or the less obvious ones in the department stores.

In the less trafficked restrooms, see graffiti – “for a good time call Joe, XXX-XXXX” and laugh at the joke Joe's friends played on him, old enough to understand it's a joke but not old enough to know why it's funny. File the memories away for later.

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There was a game room in the basement of the student union. It was adjacent to the salon, the student employment office, and “The Ritz”. “The Ritz” was RIT's academic side grill and the only food service venue on campus with a

bar. Their advertising campaign was “The RIT alcohol policy prevents us from advertising drink specials at The Ritz”.

The game room had maybe half a dozen pinball machines and twice that many arcade cabinets. Most of the space was dedicated to a number of large regulation-sized pool tables. Also, partitioned off to the right behind windows was a small bowling alley. Billiards and bowling were considered two of the easy As for our physical education requirements.

This area of the Student Union was busy during lunchtime and class switchovers, but at other times it was dead quiet. The occasional sounds of a pool ball clacking from one of the aspiring sharks and the endless loop of arcade machines in attract mode. On Saturdays it was sparsely populated. On Sundays most of the student union was closed, its main doors often locked – but if you knew the tunnel system you could find your way in.

Directly across from the game room was one of the larger men’s bathrooms on campus.

It was a two-room affair – or one big room with a dividing wall down the middle creating two sections. You entered the bathroom at its southwest corner. To your left were two rows of

west. Finishing a coffee at the French bakery when you tapped my profile. I’d never seen some one within 700 feet before, and I don’t think I’ve seen a prettier boy on the apps. I sent my usual missives and you responded like a human. As I started walking to my car, parked up by the lower Macleay trailhead, I realized I wanted to throw caution to the wind and meet you right now.

When I asked the \$64,000 question you said your last girlfriend had been trans and that, you didn’t know, there was just something about trans women you found incredibly attractive. There are worse answers, and while I have some friends who would judge me for saying this – chasing is sort of a spectrum. And you were pretty.

I was slightly nervous waiting for you on the corner and relieved when I saw you in the distance with your medium-sized dog. I remember your big goofy smile as you told me about moving to the city from that hippie college town and the friends you had up here. We rolled our eyes a bit at the wealth that surrounded us, and how much the city had changed in the past twenty years. We were both grateful for the pockets that still existed. Your autistic enthusiasm charmed me.

Dear D—,

You weren't the first man I slept with after the flood.

There was Da——, the middle-aged hipster still living like it was Portland circa 1999. A fifty-two-year-old renting a messy room in a house, proud of his specialized weed equipment. Definitely a mood. I was annoyed at how good the sex was, surprised when he wanted to spend time with me outside the bedroom, and disappointed when he treated me like one of the boys.

After that was B——, the ex-computer engineer with an apartment full of expensive toys. He preferred pre-rolls and fucking from the side. Both times I was bemused when he wanted me to stay and listen to his electric guitar. Checking off stoner dorm room cliches, thirty years after the fact.

Both these men were from dick pic island, and I heavily screened them over months. I used them in a calculated way to see how I responded to masculine attention with estrogen in my system. If felt – transactional. Familiar.

But you, D—, were different. For starters I showed your picture to a friend and she said “You met him? On Grindr? But he looks so healthy!”

I was visiting my old neighborhood in North-

sinks. Walk forward and pass the dividing wall and you'd see a bank of urinals, and then the stalls lining the back wall. Maybe ten total. Blue steel contrasts the grey tile. The last stall on the left abutted the north wall, and on this wall was graffiti that would make even a Grindr addict blush.

There were the usual array of dirty jokes that, these thirty years later, seem boring and tepid – but at eighteen fresh from the suburbs they seemed clever, wild, and provocative. Just as crass as the ones found in those Truly Tasteless Joke compilations at Walden Books. Also, endless drawings of dicks. Soft dicks, hard dicks, crying dicks. Most drawn in a crude cartoon style but occasionally a medical illustration student, or perhaps a teacher, would lend their hand to the wall with gorgeous renditions of the human torso and pelvis.

But most intriguingly, and shockingly, were the scrawled comments resembling a personals section. “Saturday 1:00 pm - 2:00 pm, third stall, red shoes”. “Tuesdays and Thursdays, 4:00 pm, looking to give oral”, “cruising the library on the 17th in the evening, Red Sox baseball hat”.

I was, at eighteen, a virgin. I had a single girlfriend in high school who broke up with me be-

cause I didn't tell her I was going away for spring break with my family, and probably because she saw my dissociation as disinterest. A few years later I'd be talking with her on the phone, both of us home from college for break, and I floated that I was thinking about dying my hair purple and she got really quiet and said "You shouldn't do that. When I see colored hair on a man – all I can think is – – – gay"

I have never, now or then, *preferred* the company of men. Then, they were my bullies with a set of social rules and hierarchies I never understood and always seemed to violate. Their cruelty a mystery to me. Women held me in an almost hypnotic sway – my attraction to them seemingly different than what the young boys in my life boasted of.

But men didn't seem to have the same expectations of me as the straight what-we-would-now-call cis girls did. The men seemed to understand the burden of a testosterone endocrine system and that sexual arousal was detached from things the what-we-would-now-call cis girls wanted.

Men offered me a path towards sexual experience, and while I knew the credits wouldn't transfer 1 to 1, I did hope the experiences I was about to seek out would leave me in better shape

during those years of discontent. At forty-five I remembered every detail of your successes and failures. As I crest fifty both you and my forty-five-year-old self feel like a shore that dropped off the horizon an aeon ago. As my body continues to change and I more fully inhabit feelings that once seemed impossible I've realized I can't remember what it feels like to be you.

I often start things without knowing why I need to do them. I think the reason I'm writing you this letter is to say goodbye. Both to who I was and to the woman neither of us got to be. And it hurts my heart to do that because I love you now in a way I could never manage then – but there's nothing I can do to help you. I am, as the poet says, ready to begin saving the only life I can save.

I love you, I'm sorry, and I forgive you. We both deserved better than the world we had. I hope you're able to find your way here.

fused at how masculine you presented.

“In my head I was like – what’s she doing, this bitch is trans?!”

That night is as close as you’ll get to what you want and need – the high water mark for a decade.

Over the next four years you’ll have one more attempt at cis-girl romance and a few more particularly degrading hook-ups with men. Your most satisfactory lover will be red wine or gin. You tell yourself it’s not drinking alone when you have the internet. As you crest 40 you’ll try to break those old patterns but instead get stuck in a sober “*feel discontent*” and presume that’s all you deserve. The god of the 4 A.M. watch will be waiting.

It will be a long seven years.

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I thought about you a lot over those seven years. *In the wink of a young girl’s eye* and all that. I started this project to understand you better. Why did you fuck all those men? What does that mean for me now?

But the thing is – I don’t know if that matters. You’re not as present in my head as you were

to be a good lover when the love of my life eventually emerged.

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It took me a few months to decide if I was going to take advantage of this free sexual marketplace. There was a complicated reckoning with my sexuality – these were the days where you were either gay or straight. To straight culture if one drip of male saliva, or any fluid, touched your lips you were a faggot (derogatory). To the gay men of the era if one drip of male saliva, or any fluid, touched your lips you were a faggot (complimentary) – and if you couldn’t claim that faggotry with 100% confidence you were a pathetic closet case or, at best, straight trade.

Bisexual men did not exist to either group. Similar dynamics were in play within lesbian culture – but also what did that have to do with me, a penis haver, right?

I would sit in the third and fourth stall and try to puzzle out whether there was actually cruising and sex happening to my right. You can spend a long time in a bathroom stall – most men enter a bathroom with the intent to leave as quickly as possible. The only ones who notice you’re

staying there longer are the ones staying there longer themselves.

I noticed people staying longer.

I would leave and glance back at the last two stalls and see left and right feet closer than you would expect.

I would hear a scuffle of feet or a hand brace against a stall wall.

I finally decided I would try to take one of these anonymous men up on their offer. Someone had scrawled their solicitation on the wall and included a *list* of days and times with instructions to circle and claim one if you were interested. I appreciated the efficient organization.

When the day came I sat in that stall – nervous that it was at a busy time. Someone entered the stall next to me and I waited. No sign was given, they did their business and left. Two minutes after the appointed time I gave in to nervousness and left the bathroom. As I did I saw an older man (which meant the grizzled age of 21, maybe 22) with a Will Riker beard and a bear’s build walking up the hall attempting to make eye contact with the men he saw. His eyes locked into mine and I felt even more panicked. I swiftened my pace down the tunnel towards the student radio station. Unlike Lot’s wife, I did

it. Had this been a boy you’d have pounded the third – maybe fourth – beer, fucked, and then drifted away. Had this been a cis woman you’d have fucked, let yourself try to be in a relationship, and then left her with both your hearts bruised. These thoughts are running through your head as she says something coy and gives you that look.

Are they on your mind because you’re tired of this old pattern and want something new? Or are they on your mind because this girl is trans and your transvestite practice fills you with shame – what could a real trans woman want from someone like you? Or are they on your mind because there’s something in you that wants to protect this girl from the world and the idea of bruising her heart feels like stabbing yourself?

At some point, you haltingly say that you’ve never been with a trans woman, that you know hormones change bodies and reactions but that you don’t know how and she tells you she’ll answer *any* question you have.

Why couldn’t you ask her your questions?

You’ll talk about this night eleven years later. She won’t remember it as precisely as you. She’ll confirm she wanted to “jump your bones”, and also tell you that when she started seeing you around in person, way back when, she was con-

bad after.

Some women would rather invent entire new hierarchies of psychology than admit to themselves they'd be happier as a girl. At least you only apply these hierarchies to yourself.

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Spring 2011. A woman you know from the house party scene and Livejournal is going to invite you out for sushi. A small hole-in-the-wall place in north Portland that has since professionalized. You'll talk, resuming conversations you've had online. She will test the waters by saying "I wonder if the chef thinks we're on a date". You will be cagey and a few weeks later she'll invite you over to her small studio apartment for beers and TV watching. Doctor Who S6E5 – The Rebel Flesh. The apartment is new to her – the old party house has parted ways after two members got divorced and she broke up with her cis ex. She can still rock a bandana though. You feel sympathy for her break up but you're also glad – you always thought L—— treated her poorly.

The waters will have passed their trials and she's flirting openly now. You have been here before – sex is probably on the table if you want

not look back.

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I went back to my stakeouts, afraid to try again.

A few weeks later I was in a middle stall during a quiet period when I heard someone else enter. They sat in the stall next to mine and I froze. Their left foot inched closer to the gap under the stall wall. I inched my foot closer. Eventually, the tips of our shoes touched. His hand gripped the stall above our feet – the two top knuckles of his four fingers visible to me. I touched his hand and he grasped mine.

He swung down and squatted – the lower half of his body visible, including an erect penis. I followed his lead. Two bodies in a crude Malasana pose, facing each other with the blue steel of the stall wall between them.

I reached out and took him in my hand – vaguely disappointed in myself that the first sexual act of my life was taking place in a men's bathroom. Holding his penis had an out-of-body energy to it. Like I was masturbating, but not feeling any sensation. The novelty of the experience was making me harder, but it's not something I'd describe as sexy. He reached over and

returned my favor, and I quickly pulled back worried I was going to come and sat back down. His head appeared upside down under the stall wall – a fratish haircut, and he whispered “Keep going”.

I looked forward and kept going, quickly ejaculating into the toilet, feeling an immense post-orgasm shame. I pulled up my pants and left the bathroom as quickly as I could.

Not quite sex, but not quite not sex. An inauspicious start.

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At the start of 1995 I returned to Buffalo, unsure what my future would be. I had washed out of the photojournalism program at RIT and state school seemed like a better place to spin my wheels than private school.

Knox Lecture Hall sits near the center of the University at Buffalo’s North Campus. A center atrium in the shape of an octagon, with four additional octagons clustered around the center. The amphitheater seating in these four octagons makes Knox UB’s largest lecture hall. Between class breaks the atrium would buzz with activity, but once classes got underway it was a quiet space where people didn’t linger.

– you’re good at survival but I wonder if trying to live would kill you. Hardly original questions.

I’m writing to you now because this is when, as much as you’ve escaped Rochester and as much as it’s true that this move is the best thing you’ve ever done for yourself, you’re starting to repeat a pattern.

Date a woman, fall in love, feel discontent.

Leave.

Fuck men, feel lonely, date a woman.

The sex is better, you’ve gotten decent at that. “Defer orgasm, listen to their body, ask questions” seems to have worked for you. The novelty of seeing a man and finding someone who fucked like a dyke was a pleasant surprise for most of your girlfriends.

You let the men take what they want, and the release is nice, but the validation is why you’re there. You’ll talk about it with therapists and friends and tell them you can understand what these men might want from someone femme presenting and that it makes you happy to give it to them. An understanding you’ve never been able to develop with gay men. You explain away that validation as feeding your codependent need to give people what they want. You try fucking men as a boy from time to time and you still feel

Dear —,

I wasn't sure when I should be sending this to, but 2008 seems like a reasonable year. You're thirty-three and after a brief flip-flop between Portland and Seattle you've settled on the former as home.

I don't know if you're happy or not right now. When the god of the 4 A.M. watch is listening I know you still have that old feeling of discontent. A feeling that everything is wrong. But you're good at keeping the god of the 4 A.M. watch away, or at least ignoring his gaze. Dancing every weekend until the bars close and sleeping off a night of drinking more often than not. The early glorious years of alcoholism when everything still works.

I guess it's disingenuous to say I don't know — because you're not happy. You are, however, grabbing moments of happiness and bliss from time to time and it's hard for you to know the difference. You're still trying to find your way. Maybe something I say to you now will sink in.

Then again I don't know what sort of time travel model we're working with. If I convinced you to transition now would that change my present? Or break off a new timeline that only you get to see? And how would all that go for you

On its north side were a men's and women's room. The men's room was small given the size of the lecture hall. It had two sections, the second created by a wall jutting out. Sinks in the front, and then a jag to the left with the urinals and stalls. Four of the former, three of the latter including a double-sized handicap stall. Orange sheet metal, white tile.

This bathroom had similar, if less, graffiti to the one at RIT — but it stands out in my memory because between the two non-handicap stalls was an honest-to-goodness glory hole. About three and a half inches in diameter, crudely cut with who knows what sort of tool, the sharp edges of the metal covered mostly in duct tape.

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The boy I lost my virginity to was named Steve. He cruised the various tearooms on campus, including Knox. I remember he put stickers for his band on the bathroom walls, but I can't remember the name of his band. We met on IRC and compared notes. I explained my inexperience and interest in gay sex. I can't remember which one of us proposed the encounter. I remember the drive to his apartment, in Buffalo proper. There was snow on the ground. It was a second-floor

apartment in an old house. A short hallway led to a kitchen. Steve's bedroom was right off that kitchen.

Afterwards, Steve offered me water in a coffee mug. He asked how it was – and I made sounds that indicated I liked it and hoped it was good for him, but also that it was a lot to think about. I remember thinking “he wants me to be blown away”. He wanted to have inducted me into the ways of men. For it to be as revelatory an event for me as it had been for him. Instead, all I'm thinking is I'd like to go home. That I've thrown away my one and only first time on some random man when I'm not even gay. Or am I gay and that's just internalized homophobia? Driving away I felt the regret growing along with a guilt that I'd misled Steve.

I also heard a voice in my head express relief: There was no grand revelation. The curtains had not parted as so many men on IRC had sworn they would. Maybe it was a mistake to have hooked up but at least now I knew I wasn't gay.

I was back cruising within a week. Years later I'd hear the phrase post-coital tristesse and instantly understand.

*maybe I didn't treat you  
quite as good as I should  
maybe I didn't love you  
quite as often as I could*

(2008 – Portland, OR)

sitioned and fought with TERFs and feel an old ache in my heart.

Your acceptance helped propel me into the life I built for myself on the West Coast and I'll always be grateful for that.

I hope the years have been kind to you.

The librarian interviewing me has a vibe somewhere between Toni Morrison and Clarice from *Dykes to Watch Out For*. I suspect she's a lesbian, and then I feel bad for suspecting that. She's explaining to me how this job, the Wallace Library Walker, is not a traditional library shelver job.

While on duty my job is to walk the four floors of the library wearing a bright yellow baseball hat. If people have questions about the library, I'm there to help them get the answers they need. I'm to pick up abandoned books and place them on the return carts and clean up left behind garbage. Occasionally I'll be told to perform surveys of patrons.

Then, she gets a little awkward, almost sheepish, when she explains the final duty: If I encounter patrons having sex in the library I'm NOT to interrupt, but instead, I am to call campus safety.

I both laugh and panic inside, realizing the job probably exists *mostly* to discourage cruising – the other duties added on to justify it. I nod, get the job, and decide if I encounter anyone having sex that I'll just tell them to beat it. Whether I'll be a cop or not is never put to the test – my presence seems to discourage whatever sex the

library brain trust were worried about.

Cops kept me away from another cruising spot in Rochester I'd heard about. Off-campus, in Highland Park. A friend's then-boyfriend was talking about how wild it was that dudes just lined up their cars on Pinetum Drive. Some stayed in their car and waited to be solicited – others wandered off into the cluster of trees to the north. Driving through the park at night I'd see the line of cars and consider it – but *off* campus cruising felt more dangerous. While the bathrooms created a risk of discovery, that risk seemed shared between partners.

Park cruising seemed isolated, increasing the chances that someone with ill intent could hurt you. Also – a few times a year police would sweep the area making arrests. Their tactics usually included entrapment – having an undercover officer solicit men for sex and encouraging them to take off their clothing, or using the non-verbal consent culture to claim unwanted sexual touch as assault.

In 2016 similar tactics at Marie Curtis Park in Toronto will spark outrage and draw protests and activism from the gay and queer communities in that city. In Rochester, in the 1980s and 1990s, the local gay press covered these busts uncritically

the time many of those cross-dressers pinned to find a girlfriend or wife who would accept their strange “hobby”. Those who found that sort of relationship were seen as the lucky ones.

This always felt – wrong? – to me. It never felt like enough, but also, that to fully explain to a partner why I was cross-dressing would have meant needing to understand it myself. I was not ready to look that in the eye. I never hid the fact of it from you or future girlfriends, but I kept my inner emotional life a secret.

It was a poor way to treat you – grasping for your intimacy and being afraid to return it in kind. I'm sorry – I wish I'd know a different way of being. I remember years later, reading through your Livejournal and discovering a post expressing your muted regret of an infidelity that I wasn't aware of and my primary thought was one of guilt for not being there for you.

Despite all that – I remember our time together fondly. Wandering Mount Hope Cemetery, endless DVD rentals from that house near twelve corners, Hypnotoad, Salad Fingers, hikes in Mendon Ponds, endless discussion of comics and that convention in Toronto, introducing me to Wet Moon the comic your friend wrote and drew. Years later I'd watch online as Sophie tran-

I remember when you asked to come to Portland with me, and how guilty I felt for saying no. I knew how badly you wanted to escape your situation. That yellow house in Palmyra. Living with your mother and her light hoarding. I remember when you told me to be still and quiet in the sewing room and then pointed out the visiting mice who were emboldened by our silence. Your amusement at the situation masking your shame.

Then there was the time your mother wanted to make diner for us and the conversation shifted to the supernatural, and she told me she saw ghosts. Was it a grift? A fun little game? Or a sign of instability? Back then I let a small part of my heart hope magic was real. You weren't able to conjure an amused look that night.

I felt your desire to leave as strongly as my own, but my romanticism always lost out to a fearful survival instinct. We'd been dating for three months – far too early to move in together. I also had fears about being able to support myself out west – all that became exponentially more complicated with a girlfriend in tow.

Also, another pattern was establishing itself. It was a weird feeling – when I read the transvestite literature or forum posts of

and discouraged their readers from cruising the park.

I only ran into trouble twice because of cop-like authorities – both times it was campus security and the second time the trouble was indirect.

The first time was in the summer of 1995 when I decided to leave UB and return to RIT in the fall. I was still using the computer lab in the evenings to chat with friends and would drift by the tearoom in Knox Hall. As I drove away from campus one night the sirens filled up my rearview mirror, and two campus security officers came up after I pulled over – student aged. Mall cop vibes. They claimed I had driven outside the lanes when taking one of the Flint Road S curves, and that my lights were off. They questioned why I was on campus and if I was a student. At the time I thought they were just busy bodies harassing me. It was only later I realized this was probably a warning.

The second time was earlier in the year. I'd cruised by the tearoom. I didn't see anyone inside and didn't feel like sitting around a stall. I had seen a larger middle-aged man watching the bathroom from outside the south doors. I didn't think anything of it and headed down to Bell Hall and the vax/unix terminals. I started chatting on

IRC with folks in the #gay and #gaysex rooms and then started privately chatting with someone with a UB email address. We both realized we were in Bell's computer lab and he asked if I wanted to fool around.

I did – we negotiated a blow job and I asked him where? Knox? He replied no, not there. He'd seen the guy out front and the guy out front seemed like campus security or a cop. He said he knew a spot and that he was going to get up and I should follow 15 seconds later.

We didn't talk as he led me through a part of campus and a maze of hallways and buildings I hadn't been through before, eventually leading to a small men's room in a seemingly deserted part of the campus. A standard two-stall affair. Beige stall doors on beige tiles. Brightly lit, but with a more yellow-toned light than the Knox bathroom. He stepped into the handicap stall and I followed, closing the door behind me.

I will spare you the lurid and uncomfortable details. Instead – I'll say he wanted more than we agreed to. I said no. He was insistent. I got out of there, but not as soon as I needed to. I remember the mean smug look on his face as I bolted from the bathroom, walking away as fast as I could, and looking for a building exit so I

Or maybe just the weird codependent dynamic E– and I had back then.

I was starting to come into my confidence. I'd paid off enough of my debt to have my move to Portland planned. I was excited at the prospect of a city full of bohemians entering peak young-person years. A city *full* of people like I imagined you to be. A chance to start my life.

You weren't the first woman I dated or slept with, but you were the first who I told everything. My bisexuality. The cross-dressing. You were chill with it – even a little intrigued/excited by a boy who wanted to wear eye makeup and skirts. I remember dressing with you a few times – you were perplexed by my regime of beard shadow covering but rolled with it. The only time I felt shame was in your reaction to my excitement over the breast forms.

If anonymous sex with men from the internet was one amplitude of my pendulum swing, then the other was attempts at traditional relationships with women like you. I never cruised when we were together – and I never wanted to. Sex with men always felt transactional, but with women it was yearning for intimacy and a holding close of something I didn't dare say, even to myself, that I wanted.

Dear F–,

I can't remember how or when we met. I do remember the first time we made out – the Shonen Knife concert at the Bug Jar. The internet tells me this was March 3rd, 2005. I was nervous but also charmed when you got Atsuko to sign that little rubber duckie. We were dating after that and I was gone to Portland that August – so call it 5 months. I still have the duck – it made the move with me to three apartments and finally a home.

I remember poking around your Photobucket account – those were the days where you could just get a directory listing of people's images if you knew how URLs worked – so maybe we met somewhere on the internet? I should dig up my old hard drives and see if there's a data trail.

I remember your Photobucket account because I found a candid picture of you and remember thinking to myself "I can't believe a girl this fucking cute is interested in me". My closest friend, E–, gave me a little stink eye about our relationship. "I don't know what you're doing with her". I wasn't 100% sure what she disapproved of. Maybe starting something when I knew I was leaving town that summer? Maybe because you were twenty-three, six years younger than me?

could figure out where on campus I was and how to get back to my car.

I didn't cry – I felt mostly numb. I was mad at him but in the way you're mad at a traffic light or a wasp or the rain. It was my fault, after all, right? For putting myself in such a sketchy situation? I just had to be more careful. More vigilant. Screen potential sex partners better. Check the weather before leaving the house.

I wouldn't think of it as an assault until much later. I know there are men who wax floridly about the time they spent or spend within cruising scenes. Bathrooms, parks, bathhouses, sex clubs. Men who are able to navigate the non-verbal consent rules and the jockeying for position and power that seem part and parcel of masculinity. Men who would realize when they were being led away from the relative safety of the public cruising spot.

I believe these men when they tell their stories – but I also know it was a terrible place for a naive teenage girl.

finished fucking inside.

Eventually, others started filtering through the house – the catty twink threw an insult my way at being the sort of guy who kept his shirt on at a sex party. I laugh now at how ashamed I was of my body despite being in the best shape of my life. Still unaware it was dysphoria. Trans women didn't talk about their baggy clothing phase back then like they do now.

We talked a bit on the ride home, but nothing of consequence. You seemed to have had a good time but agreed the vibes were kind of strange and that the twink twins were little shits.

I dropped you off at your place and you said I should call you. I nodded and never did.

I don't know when I'll be in Rochester next but I'll reach out. It'd be nice to hang out without my hangups hanging over everything.

*you always wanted me to be  
something I wasn't  
you always wanted too much*

(1995 – Rochester, NY)

Everyone talked on the deck for a bit, with twink #1 holding court and increasingly dropping hints that he wanted to get started – eventually getting up and saying that’s exactly what he was doing. We all followed him dutifully to the living room where a pull out couch and some side chairs had been arranged. I stuck to giving you head as the scene on the bed unfolded to my left and your right. I saw neither condoms nor the shame that featured in most of the hookups I’d had over the years. I caught a look of pure bliss in the smile of Wallace Wells and felt an intense jealousy born out of my inability to feel the same. I stopped, told you to join the fray, and pulled my black t-shirt back on as I made my way through the outer rim of hangers on jerking off to the scene unfolding on the bed.

I wandered the suburban home, looked at the family photographs, and wondered what I was doing there. I would have left but didn’t want to strand you. I thought about making myself a drink at the dad bar but erred on the side of being a good guest. I settled back out onto the deck and stared out into the night air. I spotted a suburban trampoline down in the yard. Part of me yearned to head down and just jump for the remainder of the evening as the rest of you

Dear Steve,

It always made me laugh a little that you shared a name with the first boy I had sex with. It’s hard to imagine you at fifty. In my head, you’re either that boy with the Benjamin Braddock good looks and no fashion sense in the Fireside Lounge or the young man years later with the same good looks, a fashion upgrade, and who’s starting at me angrily across the room at Spot Coffee.

I remember the first time we chatted online – I was back in Rochester from Buffalo, in the computer lab under Grace Watson Hall lurking on IRC. You joined the #gay channel and I saw your address was an RIT one, so I sent you a private message saying hello. Your response was equal parts transparent and comical. I’m not sure how one “accidentally” enters an IRC channel. Instead of roasting you, I tried to treat you kindly – said it was no big deal if you wanted to be in there. No big deal to be gay. Over the next few days we texted back and forth, and you owned up to joining deliberately and talked about your curiosity and desires. It felt like I was the first person you’d shared this with.

Eventually, we made a plan to meet and hookup. When I entered the Fireside Lounge

I saw you, as described, lying back on the couch and I – panicked. I kept walking straight past you, faking an errand in the interfaith center. For all the good game I talked online, my own desires were a Gordian knot. Teasing out my internalized homophobia from my legitimate discomfort with being seen as a gay *man* would take me decades.

We kept talking despite the ghosting. How many times did we hookup in my single dorm room? Maybe five? Oral sex at first – eventually you asked me to fuck you and I did. After I came I remember you cleaning up and trying to be tender with me as my post-orgasm regret set in. You repeated back things I'd said to you in that first IRC chat session, and I nodded both knowing they were true, but also that something didn't feel right to me.

We'd repeat this cycle again and again.

I remember when I tried to bottom for you in your dorm room, and your enthusiasm assumed a level of experience I didn't have. I shouted out in pain and we stopped. Probably for the best, given your roommate showed up 5 minutes later.

The last time we had sex was – in 1998? 1999? You'd moved out of the dorms and into a place downtown – a basement apartment in the old Seminary building. I topped you again

The two generous men – the one who wanted me to come first, and was indignant when my post-orgasm shame made me kick him out of my place. Then the ecstatic chaser who wanted to rub his dick on my mouth in a Motel by the Thruway and who might have been a regular if he'd been less insistent about coming to my apartment.

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So fifteen hookups over – ten years? Throw in you, the two Steves, two women, a couple, and five tearroom encounters that barely count as sex and that's more than two but less than three per year – as body counts go it felt mild.

My interest in the sex party was as much bucket list as it was lust, and the vibe was strange. A blond twink house-sitting for his parents. The suburban home with the basement dad bar. The high deck that overlooked a yard, wet with spring dew. Another, cattier twink and a third boy who retroactively reminds me of Wallace Wells as portrayed by Kieran Culkin. This triad seemed to be the center of the party, and then there were a handful of other quiet solo men whose connection to the scene was unclear.

thought I was just another reckless white boy. The man who didn't want to fool around with a man in a PVC dress and left even though I said I'm just a man in a PVC dress before inviting him over, and who a few years later hit me up again after I got better at makeup. The man with the poppers the night I set myself up in the downtown fancy hotel with a cheap Priceline rate who I topped while wearing a dress and foundation and, for the first time, felt powerful – and then I got the per minute hotel phone bill for the hours I spent cruising on dial-up internet.

The man out by the Finger Lakes hotel who wanted to see me at a park first which meant being not en femme and who never got out of his truck and emailed me with the message: "I don't think so". The gay man who I hooked up with twice, once at the Days Inn downtown and a second time at the Radisson in Henrietta and who I stopped responding to once I realized he was only tolerating my cross-dressing. The man with the gold chains and soft curly body hair who stared at me uncomfortably in my Fredericks of Hollywood dress and black wig in a way that turned me on as I'd never been before, whose erection began to flag until I revived it for the reward of a few painful thrusts and a grunt.

and we laid in bed together for longer than usual. You tried to connect with me, and I knew you were trying, but I didn't know what to say or do. Your exploration of gay sex seems to have led you where you wanted to be, but for me it was only a hydra with one head removed. We headed out the door together – me to home and you down the alleyway to Muthers. I was both disappointed and relieved when you didn't invite me to the gay bar.

I chose to drift away after that, but then later that summer I was hooking up with an older guy (thirty-two – how ancient!). I met him on the Multicom-4 BBS system. He told me I had crabs and I was mortified. You and Sa— were the only people I'd hooked up with recently, and when I let you know you confessed that they probably came from you.

I'm not proud, all these years later, of how I laid into you. Channeling all my anger and shame over this and everything else into righteous indignation at your supposed transgressions. It reminded me of the way I'd shouted at an ex-girlfriend when I found out she was dating this sketchy guy supplying her and the Florida concert scene with white crosses. I don't remember what I said, but it was a lot of all caps and the opposite

of grace. As I was doing it, I felt the shame of it, and channeled the shame of it back into the doing of it. I was held together by anger and grief in those days.

You apologized several times but I don't remember leaving satisfied.

The guy I was hooking up with showed me where to buy shampoo and the spray for my furniture. I spent the next year paranoid that I still had crabs – every itch suspect, every hair follicle secretly an egg sac. It was the first time I shaved my entire body – so thanks for that I guess. Eventually, the local STD clinic confirmed I was louse-free, and then gave me a penile gonorrhea swab for my trouble. The doctor praised both my proactive shaving as well as the fact I didn't bolt after the swab, which sometimes happened.

I've wondered a lot about what you were thinking as you stared at me that evening. I remember a familiar dissociative helplessness setting in. In your eyes was I a pathetic closet case? A selfish "straight" bisexual using you as a jerk-off rag? Or just a boy who was careless with your heart?

I doubt "closeted bisexual, future transsexual, subconsciously grasping for anyone else outside of straight norms" was in your matrix. I could

with the van at that ice cream stand who sketched me out so I didn't go back with them. The man in the arts district whose coffee shop and vintage apartment I coveted. The boy with the smelly dick in the science lab, who I bailed on when I discovered his smelly dick. The effete boy who looked up my dorm room number with my IRC address and showed up at my door unannounced and wouldn't leave until I closed the door and ignored his persistent knocking.

The art student with the curved penis who was surprised we weren't harassed as we stumbled back to his apartment in the snow on a Saturday night buzzed on bad red wine and who was crestfallen the next week when he realized it was, for me, just a hookup. The thirty-two-year-old from the gay BBS who told me I had crabs. The man who lived five blocks away whose room in the house felt like a winterized sun porch. The man whose live-in boyfriend was a bartender at the Bachelor's Forum and whose nearby attic apartment was up two flights of not-to-code stairs bolted to the back of a house who wanted to bottom for oral sex and offered me a crusty towel to clean myself up.

The kind man with the warm smile and perfect abs who slowed things down and probably

dance of

Me: “I’m horny but don’t want to say.”

You: (silently) “All you need to do is say out loud that you want it.”

Did I actually overcome my hesitation? I might have. By then I was starting to get my depression under control. Leaving Rochester was finally in sight. Or was it you who said something first, needing a ride to that sex party?

I can’t remember which suburb we were heading out to – it was unfamiliar to me and maybe 25 to 30 minutes away. Let’s call it Perinton. We caught up a bit in the car and I mentioned never heading out this way before and you scoffed – “Like you’ve never hooked up with guys out here”.

The statement stung – your assertion of a sluttery that I didn’t feel I lived up to. As you talked I started making a mental list of the hits and misses.

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The boy in the tightie whities who I walked out on when he got too aggressive. The two bears

barely glimpse it myself.

I tried to find you post-transition, but a first name and an IRC handle aren’t a lot to go on. Sa— said he hadn’t seen you in years. I wish we could have treated each other better, all those years ago. Our own version of reproductive interference I suppose. I hope you got out of that city and found the boyfriend you always wanted and deserved.

Dear Sa—,

I'm glad we were able to reconnect a few years back, even if it was the mildest of Facebook hellos. I laughed when I saw your birthday party invite — I had somehow got it in my head you were barely eighteen the first time we hooked up in your International House dorm room and not, as your modern invite revealed, two years older than me. Decades of age gap guilt dissipated in a moment.

It makes sense when I think about it though. How quickly those two hookups turned into you asking about intentions and if I wanted to date you — and your quick acceptance when we tried and it was clear there was something holding me back. I think it was when I was hanging out with my floormates and you returned my belt. I felt a sense of panic and not wanting to be seen as dating a gay man — despite these being the same boys who I'd chase around threatening to kiss at parties.

You handled me with a lot more emotional maturity than Steve did — or maybe just with the caution that a gay Venezuelan immigrant needed around the white queers he pursued.

I've wondered why you kept in touch with me after school. It was a weird sporadic — acquaintain-

tanceship? — we had. Half the time I'd hang out with you hoping you'd proposition me but you seemed to know you deserved better than that — forcing me to state an interest if we were going to hookup again.

You were the first friend I had who suffered walking while not-white from the cops — or the first who shared the experience with me — and I remember feeling the deep injustice of it, but not knowing what to say to you about it. I also remember an awkward conversation about Hugo Chavez — my then naive American leftist idealism vs. you still having people there. In the months that followed it was a huge catalyst in my politics maturing.

I regret not asking you more about your drag — even then I both knew it was something I wanted but not like you and those other pageant queens wanted. I remember giving you a ride somewhere and not being able to place why you looked so different until you said “It's my eyebrows honey, I shave them off for competition”. Full dedication to the bit. A crime when you lost the Business Fit category because the judge didn't like your under-blouse made from compact discs.

The last time I remember seeing you was spring 2004. We were chatting online, doing that