

Queer

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6 26459 66666

T.O.C

CREATOR'S

NOTE (3)

**VALIDITY OF
LESBIAN LOVE**

(5)

GIRL TALK

(10)

PUSSY TALK

(11)

ON GRAYNESS

(13)

KAREN'S

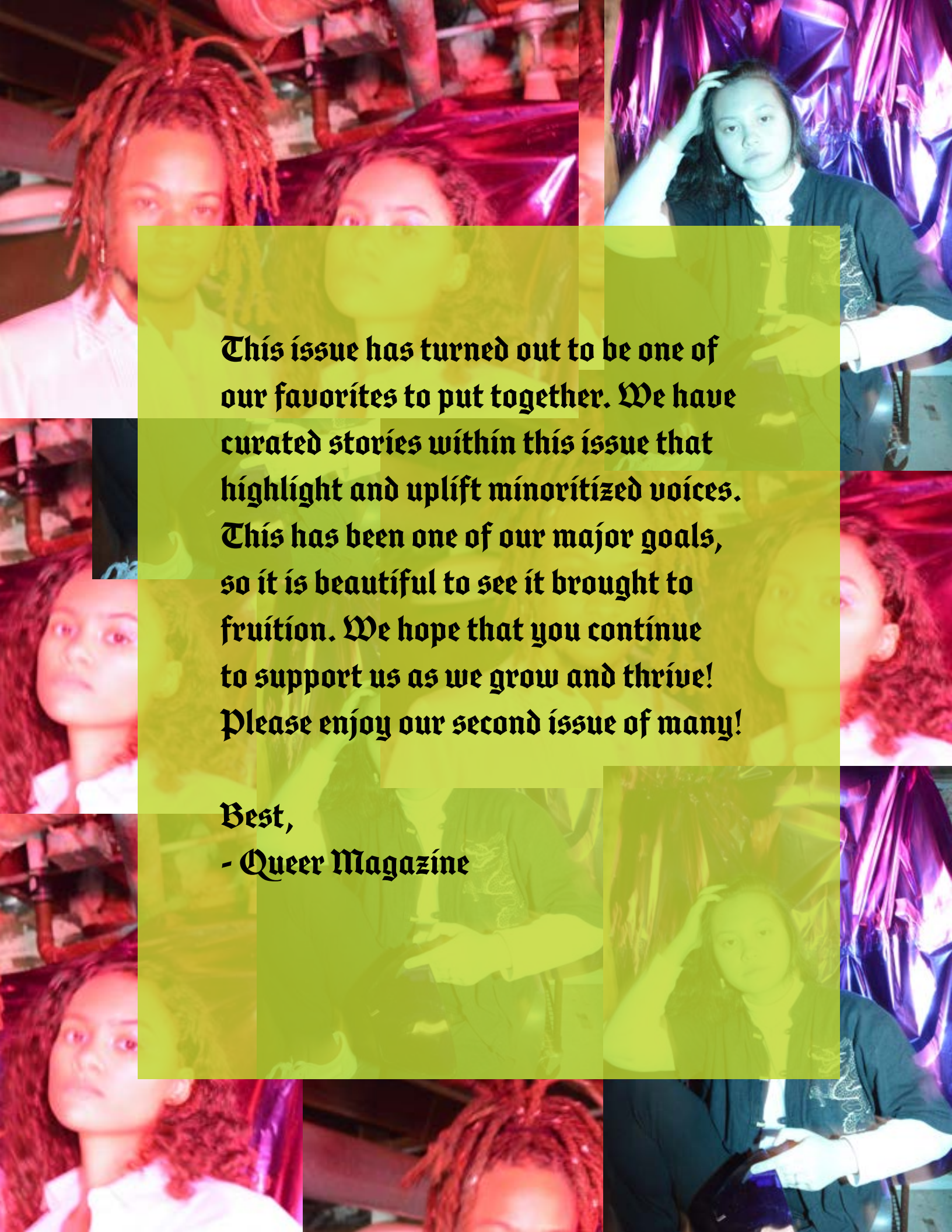
CORNER

(18)

**STOP ASIAN
HATE (19)
APPARENTLY,
I HAVE PANDO-
RA'S BOX
(22)
BENJAMIN AND
THE PATIENT
(24)
PUBLICATION
TEAM
(27)
MODELS
(28)**



Creator's Note



This issue has turned out to be one of our favorites to put together. We have curated stories within this issue that highlight and uplift minoritized voices. This has been one of our major goals, so it is beautiful to see it brought to fruition. We hope that you continue to support us as we grow and thrive! Please enjoy our second issue of many!

**Best,
- Queer Magazine**



Validity of Lesbian Love


| Ainsley Fitzgerald

I didn't call myself a lesbian in high school. Instead, I came out time and time again, cycling through a multitude of labels that didn't quite fit: bisexual, pansexual, queer, gay. Through it all, I never called myself a lesbian. Repeatedly after coming out, I doubted whether I was really interested in women at all, thinking I was just "confused". Even over this past summer, I briefly considered trying to date men again. It always felt like a lot of work to be queer, what with the undermining commentary from my peers and the public that had me continuously questioning my identity.

Growing up, I felt much more comfortable bringing up male crushes than female ones. I always felt the need to explain and overcompensate for my female crushes, but my male crushes were never questioned. I fell into a pattern of convincing myself that I didn't actually like women; that I was just disinterested in boys who were immature and annoying. A trend of doubting myself and my identity emerged, intensifying after someone questioned my queerness. Freshman year, I had a crush on a masculine-presenting woman, and a friend told me that didn't really count. Sophomore year, I came out to my father and he asked if "gay" was the right word to use since I had dated boys before. Junior year, the dating scene and hookup culture was centered around heterosexuality, alienating me from discussions about sexuality. And in senior year, I had

my first girlfriend and finally felt qualified to engage in discussions about sex and love only to have my closest friends question if I was really having sex. There's this constant pressure to simultaneously be doing more, to prove that you're a "real" lesbian, and to be doing less, to avoid acting like the stereotypical queer woman. Even in the most accepting communities, like my hometown, misconceptions and preconceived notions of what a lesbian should be can be incredibly pervasive.

I was absent from queer spaces before I came to college. They can be incredibly difficult to find, especially when you don't know where to look. That's not to say that I wasn't exposed to queer culture; I walked in my hometown's pride parade, marched in LGBTQ+ rights protests, and enjoyed local drag performances. The issue was that it all seemed very removed from me. I couldn't see myself in the minimal representation I had access to. Primarily, the queer exposure I had was to gay men. While I acknowledge the many benefits and privileges of being in proximity to a queer community growing up, the lack of lesbian role models made it difficult to grapple with my sexuality. I didn't match up to the lesbian stereotypes that were imprinted into my mind. The only real experience I had with queer women was through incredibly limited media representation and my mom's two butch lesbian acquaintances. In high school, I fervently searched for queer media,



“How are queer women supposed to develop any sense of belonging when the attacks on our identity have such breadth and persistence?”

seeking some sort of revelation about my identity. I think part of the reason it was so difficult for me to accept an identity that so clearly fit my romantic and sexual attractions was that I didn't see myself in any of the lesbian tropes in pop culture and media.

Queer characters typically fall into a selection of tropes that are incredibly pervasive in media and its representation of lesbian attraction. When I watched *Orange Is the New Black*, I was introduced to the “aggressive lesbian.” One of the main characters, Suzanne, or “Crazy Eyes,” is continually used for comedic effect as the crazy, dangerous, butch lesbian. Her attraction to others is unwarranted. Through that lens, I began to see any interest in women as unrequited and therefore predatory. I felt uncomfortable with the idea of pursuing any interest in girls. After watching *Blue is the Warmest Color*, I experienced the hyper-sexualization of lesbianism. Each scene bordered on pornographic with all the subtle undertones of male fetishization. Julie Maroh, who authored the graphic novel on which the film was based, even criticized the lack of queer advisors on set. The relationship between the two main characters is clearly framed through a heterosexual lens and their sexual encounters blatantly choreographed. I could not get lost in a love story because I was constantly

thinking about how these scenes were designed to get a reaction out of their viewers. LGBTQ+ media is sparse and even when I can find it, all too frequently I get the sense it is created more for the straight viewer than the queer one. From watching this movie, I felt that my sexuality was controversial, provocative, and inherently the subject of objectification.

Social stigma discouraged me from claiming a queer identity when I was younger. So, I told myself to just wait it out. I held onto the idea that I would “get the chance to be gay” in college, and that would be enough. Within that train of thought lies an issue: the idea of a “temporary lesbian.” It's the idea that girls are only gay in college or that lesbians have simply not found the right man yet. Sexuality is incredibly fluid and experimentation is so natural, but I always felt like my attraction to women was only going to be a stage of my life. That at some point, I would have to settle down with a man. How are queer women supposed to develop any sense of belonging when the attacks on our identity have such breadth and persistence? From the character tropes on our TV screen to the stereotypes that diminish lesbianism, it is a battle to claim a label that has been warped and stigmatized.

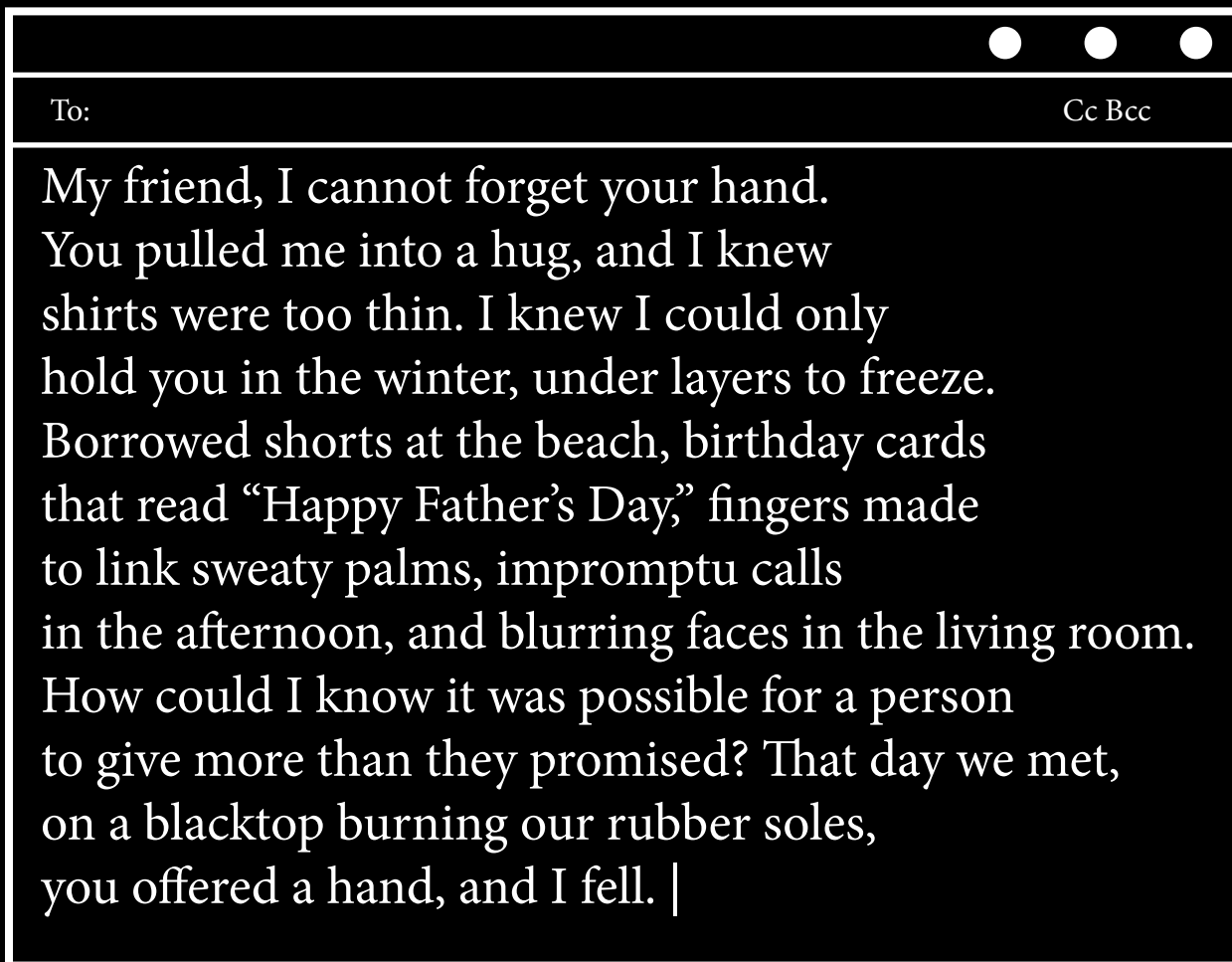






Girl Talk

| Elisha Chen



PUSSY TALK

| Milan Carter

Dear Pussy Talk,

Sometimes I think I want to have sex but then I realize that means someone else will have to see me naked and that makes me uncomfortable. Any suggestions on how to overcome this?

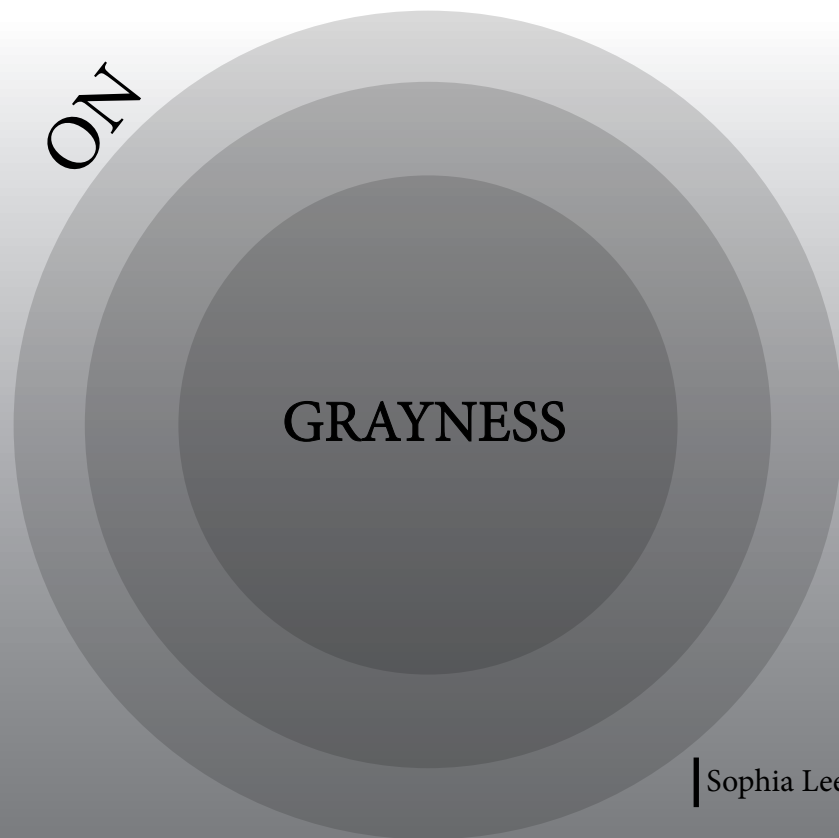
Roxy*

Dear Roxy,

I totally understand your apprehension and it is completely valid. Being naked in front of someone is an entirely new level of vulnerability that can be scary no matter how many times you've had sex. Loving the way you look is an ongoing challenge, and half the battle is finding a partner that respects you enough to support you-wherever you are in your journey. I would first have you ask yourself, "Do I see myself as a sexual being? Do I understand why someone would desire me?" Personally, I think both answers should always be YES! If you think you're hot, that confidence will radiate even if you have to fake it until you make it for a while. One of my other favorite body-confidence exercises is standing in front of a mirror naked. I know this sounds so daunting, but looking at what someone else would see while affirming your own beauty can be incredibly empowering. In my own experience, having a partner (whether it's a one night stand or a long-term relationship) who compliments you frequently and is visibly excited to be with you can do wonders for alleviating your self-consciousness. There's also nothing wrong with telling someone outright that you're conscious about a specific body part and asking them to avoid it. Boundaries are sexy! This issue won't be resolved overnight; no journey to self-discovery is ever quick. The good news is... you're worth the effort! Plus, you'll never know how you feel about something until you try it. So, I encourage you to use these tips on your own and then, if and when you feel ready, find someone and show them how fabulous and gorgeous you are!

* names changed of course!





I've thought about sex more in the past two months than I have in the past twenty years of my life: not in a fun way, not about any person in particular. Just sex and what it means to me. And what it doesn't.

Sexual attraction, I've learned, is something that most people experience. According to Wikipedia, "Sexual attraction is attraction on the basis of sexual desire or the quality of arousing such interest. Sexual attractiveness or sex appeal is an individual's ability to attract the sexual or erotic interests of other people and is a factor in sexual selection or mate choice." When I think of sex, I think of media, which tells us that sexual attraction is meeting eyes with someone from across the bar, slinking into the empty seat next to them, and asking if you can buy them a drink. It exists in the insinuation of a smile, the suggestion of a raised eyebrow, the lingering of a hand that trails to the small of your back. Maybe it's a quick fuck in the bathroom stall. Maybe it's a celebration of love.

My first time was in the summer. I was fifteen and it was with my girlfriend of one year. We'd talked about it for weeks, hours spent flipping through the calendar to find a day her mother would be at work and a day my parents would be too preoccupied with arguing to care where I'd be; luckily for us, there was no shortage of things my parents could argue about. We marked it down on our phones, the passage of time forever split into the periods before sex and after, virgin and post-virgin.

It was blindingly bright that day, the sun white-hot against the back of my neck, the sky a cool shade of blue. Waiting anxiously on the front steps of her house, I imagined the watchful gaze of a nosy neighbor trained on the tenseness of my shoulders, the fidgeting of fingers ironing out the creases of an old shirt—smoothing out one wrinkle only to make room for another. Somehow, they knew, and I knew that they knew, and before I could linger on the portrait of anxiety I had painted for myself, surreal like the draped form of a

“Last week, without thinking, I’d exclaimed, ‘What even counts as bad sex,’ during a Zoom meeting that had somehow turned to stories about bad hook-ups.”

clock on a tree branch, the screen door opened. I stepped inside slowly, careful not to be too obvious.

And then, it happened.

The rush of excitement, the tangle of limbs, the humidity of summer heat. It was a little awkward, as all first times are; that’s what we’re told anyway. I remember hoping that the research I did the night before paid off, that my partner felt as loved and as cared for as I did. I remember panicking about whether I erased my search history on the shared family computer, if I even closed out my tabs. Most of all, I felt accomplished, like I’d just checked a box off a big coming-of-age checklist. Something like a YA movie played at the back of my mind, warning about the dangers of sexlessness in your teenage years. No longer virgin, and thank god for that.

When I think sexless, I think of these things: retainers, frumpy sweaters, acne-ridden teenagers, neckbeards, chastity belts, grown men with “bachelor pads.” This list is bizarre, but if “what makes a virgin” was a question on Family Feud, I’m sure most of America would come up with a similar list of answers.

Where media portrays sex as thrilling and sensual and full, it shows not-sex to be embarrassing, laughable, even tragic in some cases. To be sexless is to want to be anything but and this idea, that sex is the defining measure of life satisfaction, has been reiterated in countless movies: *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, *The Olivia Project*, *The Water Boy*, *The To-Do List*, *Fifty Shades of Gray*, *American Pie*, *American Honey*, *Below Her Mouth*, and thousands of other movies alike. Sex is intrinsic. It’s inevitable. It’s inextricably tied to love and passion and all the things that make life exciting. A life without sex—good sex—we’re told, is a complete and utter waste of living.

Last week, without thinking, I’d exclaimed, “What even counts as bad sex,” during a Zoom meeting that had somehow turned to stories about bad hook-ups. Fortunately, I was muted. Unfortunately, I had forgotten about the friend that was sitting next to me, who had turned her head and looked at me like I’d asked how someone could tell the difference between a bottle of bleach and a bottle of Gatorade without taking a sip of both.

“What?” she practically gasped.

“I mean, sex is sex, right? How can it be good or bad? It’s just something that happens and is nice.”

Her brows furrowed. “I don’t understand.”

My brows furrowed. “Me neither.”

Maybe I’m privileged. Maybe I’ve never been unfortunate enough to have bad sex. But it’s conversations like this that make me feel like I’ve revealed too much about myself. Like if life were a cartoon, this would be the moment I step onto the prone form of a rake and whack

myself square on the forehead. And it always starts like this—with a throwaway comment, a general assumption about love and sex that I've taken for granted—only to be met with emphatic disagreement or worse, incredulity.

Conversations like:

“Do people actually look at someone and think, ‘Damn, let’s fuck?’”

“Um, yeah?”

Or,

“I think if my partner suddenly decided they never wanted to have sex again, I’d be fine with it.”

“How...?”

How is a question I've been asking myself a lot lately.

In 1977, Stanford University Professor Lee Ross conducted an experiment to test the “false consensus effect,” which occurs when individual biases towards a certain ideology or decision-making process are generalized to large swaths of the population. Ross found that people, more often than not, assumed that their beliefs were shared by a majority of the population, often erroneously. In addition, when asked to rate the traits of people who chose an alternative option to their own, subjects often rated them more extremely with higher scores for negative traits. This arrogance, the presupposition of individual correctness despite a limited breadth of experience, on the smallest scale, leads to judgmental comments and hurt feelings.

On a larger scale, it's fascism.

Every conversation I've had lately has been something of an inadvertent experiment and every one of them has led to the same conclusive results. I've found that I am not immune to the false consensus effect. Instead, I have time and time again assumed that my perspective on sex and love and attraction is one that is shared by many, only to be slapped in the face with the reality that I know barely anything of my own desires, much less the desires of the majority.

These past few months, I've felt something unravel within me. A thread I was able to keep spooled for most of my life now a tangled knotty mess in my chest. Everything I thought to be true about love and attraction and how I factored into all of that is now a flurry of questions. What is sexual attraction? Have I ever experienced it? What's the difference between sexual desire and sexual attraction? What does it mean that I almost never feel the urge to have sex, but other forms of intimacy—kissing, cuddling, the feel of a person—are things I crave so much it hurts? What does it mean that my last girlfriend had smiled and said that my love was enough when I mentioned my confusion? And that the last person I'd been with saw what I had to offer, wrung her hands, and backed away quietly.

Asexual. Demisexual. A spectrum of gray.

Two months ago, my friend recommended I read a book called *Loveless*. Huddled under my sheets, eyes red and puffy from heartbreak—a breakup I never saw coming though I should have—I read to keep from crying myself to sleep for the twelfth night in a row. I read all 435 pages that night, not because I wanted to, but because I couldn't do otherwise. Until then, the terms “asexuality” and “gray-scale” seemed inapplicable to me. I'd had relationships before. I'd had sex and enjoyed it. There was no way I was ace or aro or any of the shades in-between.

Right?

There's a term for the feeling I felt then: *nodus tollens*. The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows describes it as this: "the realization that the plot of your life doesn't make sense to you anymore—that although you thought you were following the arc of the story, you keep finding yourself immersed in passages you don't understand, that don't even seem to belong in the same genre—which requires you to go back and reread the chapters you had originally skimmed to get to the good parts, only to learn that all along you were supposed to choose your own adventure." Flipping through the pages of a book I didn't know existed before then, reading the internal musings and the grievances of a character who could never, and would never, feel romantic or sexual love in a way most people take for granted, I felt I had skipped ahead a few chapters in my own book. All new characters, no explanation about how I got there. The overwhelming desire to desire was a feeling I had never seen put into words before and yet I understood it implicitly. I'm still reeling from the weight of this revelation.

We are told that sex is a natural part of life. You don't have to be in love to have it, but you have to have it when you're in love. If your partner can't make you climax, leave them; they don't care about you enough to try. If they don't want to have sex as often as they used to, they're not interested anymore; or maybe they're cheating on you; or maybe, hopefully, they're just depressed. Missionary is boring. Choking is in. A relationship without sex is terminal.

But what if sex isn't all that important to you? What if you don't crave it the way most people do? What if the only reason you have sex is because the act of giving pleasure is more fulfilling than actually receiving it? What if sex isn't part of the equation for you?

Do you get to be in love?

Loveless. The title of the book, of course, was a misnomer. The main character finds that love comes in infinitely many forms, that sex is not the only measure of love, and that the notion that romantic love is a stronger, more passionate bond than any other form is false. In the last two months, I've slowly come to find the same things to be true in my life. Love is a friend that draws a portrait of you in their sketchbook just because they thought of you that day. Love is a sister that's too busy to talk very often but not too busy to leave baked goods outside your door, a little note with your name and a smiley face scrawled underneath. Love is the laughter that swells in the late hours of the night after a little too much wine and a story about a chance encounter with a deer on campus leaves everyone doubled over in stitches. It's knowing that for every one person that wrings their hands in discomfort at the mention of the A in LGBTQIA+, there's another that will take your hands into theirs and promise you that you're enough.

I won't lie and say that I'm not still confused: about who I am, what label to use, all the feelings and experiences that don't ever seem to match up quite right. I still don't quite understand the separation between attraction and desire, the actual divide between demi-sexuality and asexuality, the vast range of experiences that labels always fail to convey. I still lie awake at night wondering if love will be a little harder to come by now, though, rationally, I know better. But despite all the uncertainty, I know these three things to be true:

I am not an anomaly.

I am not alone.

I love as fiercely as I am loved.



KAREN'S CORNER

You will not believe the appalling video that I found on my 17-year-old son's phone. He was watching a video of a black man pole-dancing and then giving a lap dance to the devil. YES! I SAID THE DEVIL. Can you believe the things that pass for entertainment these days? Little Timmy says it's some rapper named Little Nas X. The only thing I can say to that is the rapper should have been named Big Nasty because I find his behavior scandalous. Men should not be wearing heels and giving lap dances. If my husband Gerald did that, I would simply have to send him out to our pastor for treatment.

With that being said, how dare these fruity thugs infect the ears of our impressionable children. At this age, they should be looking to role models like Donald J. Trump, not some little black fairy. If we continue to allow our children to listen to this blasphemy, they'll turn out to be the worst thing imaginable: a homosexual. Can you imagine all the issues that come with having a gay child? How will I have grandchildren? How will I show my face at the country club? How will I go to church and stand before god knowing I raised one of those?

This is why I make sure to always check in on what my children are watching. When my son was young I made sure to censor all of the bad channels. The only thing I let him watch was PBS Kids and only when I was with him. There is no way I would let him see two men hug or even be remotely nice to each other. If he saw that, he would've gotten the wrong idea and thought it was okay to show affection to other men. We all know what happens when men are nice to each other; they do the devil's dance.

My pastor says that we should abstain from all sin and that is why I took little Timmy's phone today. It's not the first time this has happened, so he should know not to watch those kinds of videos. When I take little Timmy's phone, I make sure he's not doing anything bad. I look through his photos, social media, and even the games he plays. You can never be too safe. Today, I found a new app on his phone with an orange mask on it. I'm pretty sure it's some fantasy football app though because only men use it to talk. Anyway, I have to get going because Gerald just got home from his third shift at work.

Much Love,
Karen

STOP ASIAN HATE

| Christopher
Moy-Lopez

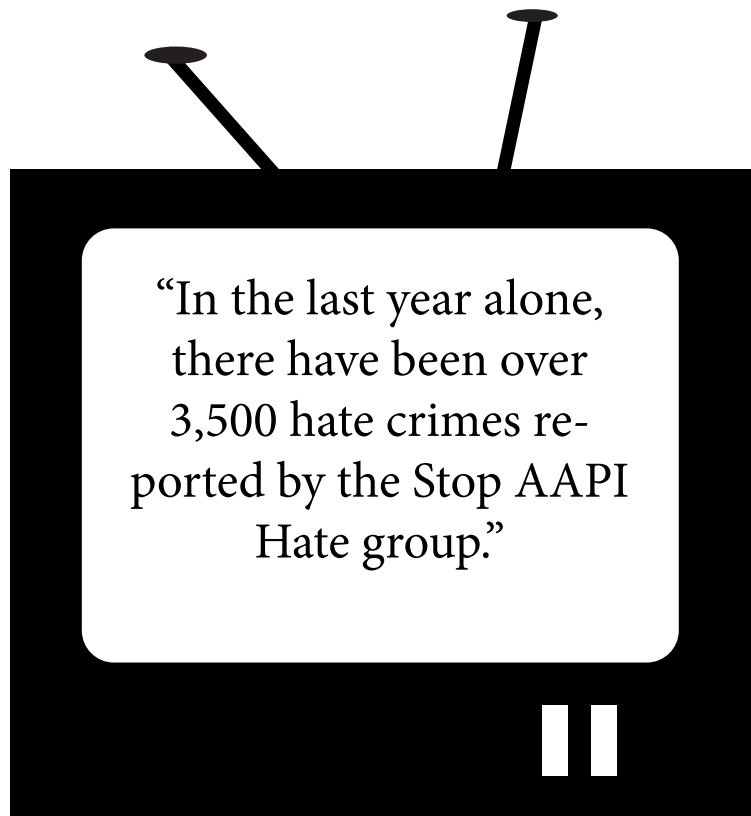
We live in a society that pushes hate as an agenda, one that thrives off the idea of an “other”. We live in a society that preys on the innocence of children, forces them to grow up way before their time. I know this feeling of despair. I know this feeling of panic and worry for your loved ones: worries about whether a trip to work might be their last, whether a walk home might mean staring down the barrel of a gun.

In recent events, we have seen a dramatic increase in the reported hate crimes against the Asian community in the US. In the last year alone, there have been over 3,500 hate crimes reported by the Stop AAPI Hate group. These statistics will not fade over time; the only thing that will change is how “relevant” Asian discrimination remains when the political climate shifts its attention elsewhere—post-covid, post-caring.

We, as a community, have been silent for too long about our experiences with racism and bigotry. We have faced structural oppression in the form of Japanese internment camps, where our land was stolen in favor of the United States’ capitalistic greed. We have faced fetishization with roots dating back to the 1870s,

when Chinese women were stolen and forced to live as prostitutes in the United States: where they were forced to cater to the needs of pigs who could care less about the child behind the vagina. We have faced exploitation when helping to build this country up from the ground, laboring over the glorious failure of the transcontinental railroad, only to be repaid in lynchings and exploding mines. These are the things that our system does not tell you. At most, you will hear about the Chinese exclusion act of 1882. If you are lucky, your school systems may even sprinkle in a small reading on Japanese internment camps during AAPI heritage month. But this information is often treated like the chipped glass of a prized China set—hidden in the cupboard so no one can see.

You would rather we stay the token nerd or F.O.B in TV shows that exist only for your entertainment. You would rather we let our issues be negated by the model minority myth, created by the white race to divide the BIPOC community—racial mascotting used to deny our experiences with racism. You would rather think that we are all crazy rich Asians who do not have to experience the everyday struggles that



come with melanin. Asians have one of the highest income gaps among any race, but the groups at the bottom—the Hmong, the Lao, the Burmese, and countless more—are ignored because of your preconceived notion that we are all the same: that we are not burdened by racism the way other minorities are. You would rather view us as white because then you do not have to acknowledge another flaw in your system of oppression and greed. If you did see the melanin in our skin, it would challenge your outdated notions of equality in this country. You would have to acknowledge that you are a part of a system that seeks to divide and promote individual interests over the possible benefits for the collective. We would have to be acknowledged under programs that promote equity—affirmative action & the Equal pay act, SNAP. Yet, because you are money hungry and want to stay in

your bubble of delusion, you do not acknowledge our experience in society. You deny our humanity in favor of a world where you can sit on your couch eating Chinese take-out and watching anime. And maybe, if the mood strikes you, you'll appropriate our features for a "trendy" Instagram makeup look.

We are tired of your silence: tired of horny, racist white men that can't deal with the fact that they desire the people that they oppress, a cognitive dissonance they solve with guns and bloodshed. Do us a favor and step the fuck off that couch and unlearn the anti-Asian sentiments and racist mindset that you were taught.

That's the least you can do.

Thanks xoxo

Your dog-eating, coin-slot-eyed, tokenized Asian.



APPARENTLY,

I have Pandora's BOX

| Syd Beausoleil

*** TW: Sexual Assault***

Sex, particularly penis in vagina sex, was a mystery to me for most of my teen years. I couldn't wrap my head around how everyone seemed to have a great time during sex. This confusion was partially because of how disconnected I felt from my body, and partially because I hadn't had any good experiences myself.

When we first learn about sex, we're groomed to believe that the consequence of owning a vagina is subjecting yourself to pain or discomfort for the pleasure of your partner. My main takeaways from conversations about sex, whether it was with friends, family, or the show "The Secret Life of an American Teenager" (my Holy Scripture at the time), were that my first time would hurt like a bitch. I was taught that that was something I had to be okay with. All the while, I never heard stories of people with penises learning how to pleasure people with vaginas to ensure that their first times were as pleasurable as possible. Why was I taught to brace myself for pain, when this could be avoided or at least put at ease by teaching people about the importance of pleasure for BOTH partners during intercourse?

My first consensual sexual experience was dehumanizing. When I made him aware that he hadn't aroused me enough yet, he pushed my concerns aside and forced himself on me. While I had consented to sex with this individual, the moment my concerns were not respected, my agency was taken away. This was assault. And while my other interactions with penises did not always fall under this category, I found it was a recurring theme that my pleasure would never be a priority. Even after bullying some of my sexual partners with penises into pleasing me as well, I had experiences where I'd leave and have to turn to my

trusty vibrator to receive the pleasure I deserved. If I don't orgasm even once during sex and YOU do, there's a problem. And the root of it, is sexism.

It's no surprise that penises are put on a pedestal. We talk about the penis all the time! It's in our colloquial language. We make jokes about it. We draw it on school desks. We make giant snow sculptures of dicks on CKB quad. This "penis worship" sadly translates to the bedroom as well. In P in V sex, penises seem to get all of the attention and typically the sex is considered over once the partner with the penis orgasms. In fact, penile orgasms seemingly happen so much more often that vaginal orgasms are an anomaly. According to a CNN article, only a quarter of people with vaginas experience orgasm.

[go into history about the male orgasm being prioritized> myth that women were more likely to get pregnant if they didn't reach climax, history of the subjugation of women, history of women being used and seen as property, history of women having no agency, etc. etc.]

There is a long history of minimizing the importance of the vaginal orgasm, which is still deeply ingrained in our culture today. How do we fix this? Well, we need to teach people to pay attention to their partner's bodies and ensure that everyone involved in intercourse is getting the attention they need. For example, not everyone with a vagina can orgasm from penetration. You gotta give more than just in and out... and in and out...and in and out. We have to normalize communication, paying attention to the bodies of people who own vaginas and finding out what makes their toes curl. My orgasm means just as much as yours. Always. In order to dismantle the patriarchy, we must rip dicks off their pedestals and put vaginas up there instead.



Benjamin and the Patient

Christopher
Moy-Lopez

Benjamin was never the sort to concern himself with the throes of love, and he tried to make this clear to his mother one night whilst coming back from a horrid date. It wasn't that Benjamin didn't believe in love per se, but more so that he had never felt that spark—the one that shot through your core and made your heart burst into fireworks.

To Benjamin, love was nothing more than a chemical interaction, just dopamine, and norepinephrine. He was keen on maintaining his routine of waking up, doing rounds at Saint Francis Memorial, doing paperwork, then heading home to start the day over again. The only problem was his meddling mother who insisted that he try to meet a nice girl and give her some grandchildren before she died. Therefore, in an effort to appease his mother's mind, Benjamin had agreed to be set up on a date with the daughter of one of his mother's friends. Susan was the girl's name, though it made no difference to Benjamin. To Benjamin, she was just like any other girl. She was obsessed with Tom Cruise and had a face like Molly Ringwald. To Benjamin, she could have been Madonna and it wouldn't have made any difference. Benjamin didn't disclose this information to his mother though when she rang him on the subway back. To her, he gave a prompt "It was okay," which would earn him a few more months of solitude before she tried to set him up again.

Benjamin looked around the cart at the faces that surrounded him and wondered if these people also had the problem of what felt like a non-existent heart. He scanned a young woman in her teens reading Shakespeare and wondered if he himself would ever know a love like that in fair Verona. Did he have the capacity to love and be loved? His gaze flitted to an old man reading the San Francisco Chronicle. The headline was titled "Risk of AIDS for S.F. Gays Is Skyrocketing, Study Says," with the byline that even a single unsafe contact could pose serious threats. The virus had first been seen in the states about five years ago and was only recently named. It seemed the virus permeated every aspect of life and this rang truer for no one more than Benjamin. Benjamin had just graduated from UCSF when the virus was first discovered and since then, his entire residency was consumed by the virus that hollowed out cheeks, plucked hair, and left its victim writhing in rashy agony.

As the virus spread, local bathhouses and clubs across the state closed and Benjamin's social life had suffered severely. Benjamin felt as if society would never return to what it once was. He was lifted out of his state of melancholy by a man around his age who had suddenly sat down across from him. His wardrobe stood in contrast to Benjamin's own dull attire: the vibrant reds and yellows of his turtleneck, tucked into acid-wash Levis that cut off right at his sneakers. His face was plump, but it had hard lines underneath eyes that were dark with years of stress and disappointment. Benjamin was most intrigued with the man's hair that was like honey with little flecks of gold at the tips; it looked like a kindling ablaze beneath the fluorescent lights of the cart. The man looked so free, but his eyes conveyed a sense of confinement in their own destiny like the man knew his fate was sealed. This intrigued Benjamin because this look was familiar; he saw it in the patients he looked after in the hospital, the hopeless ones. As if, on cue, the man's dark, piercing eyes met Benjamin's, and then they did something unexpected; they curled into little half-moons as the man smiled. In a way that could only convey embarrassment at being caught, Benjamin gave a sheepish smile and turned to the window to hide his blushing cheeks.

"So what are you coming back from?" The man said with a smile dancing on his lips.

Benjamin was at a loss for words; he responded politely. “Work,” not feeling the need to rehash his bore of a date.

“What do you work as? I bet someone like you does something important— with your slicked-back hair and fancy pants.”

Benjamin smiled at the teasing compliment and returned with, “Maybe I am important. We can’t all veg out in jeans.”

This exchange only lasted a few seconds but was enough for the man to move to the seat next to Benjamin.

“So, what does Mr. Important like to do in his spare time?”

Benjamin was caught off guard by the sudden intrusion of this personal space, and yet he almost didn’t mind because, at this distance, he could see the glint of desire in the other man’s eyes. Benjamin could not fathom an answer other than “reread old med school textbooks.” Was this the firework moment that Benjamin had heard of? Was it the moment that feelings ceased being just chemicals and they turned into raw passion?

“So, you are a doctor? That has got to be pretty grody with everything going on. How do you de-stress?”

Benjamin could not focus on the man’s words, but could only stare at his lips that were slick with spit. It felt wrong and intrusive, but captivating. Benjamin realized that he had to answer the question at hand and his eyes looked up to see a knowing look and sense of mirth. Benjamin replied in a trance-like state

“I like to go on walks and also go to the gym when I can.”

The next subway stop was approaching and the man stood. He looked at Benjamin with an arched brow.

“This is my stop, so I gotta motor on out of here, but we should take a walk sometime.”

Benjamin recognized the words as more than an offer for a walk, it was an opportunity to be lifted out of the state of melancholy that he was in. He looked around and followed the man out of the cart.

The following week, Benjamin was back to his usual routine, yet he was still riding the high that came from his walk with the man from the metro. The night had ended with soft moans and later light snores. It was followed by a walk back to the metro station where Benjamin took the subway back to Saint Francis Memorial and started his next shift. Benjamin had never caught the man’s name but he was in such a giddy state that asking for his name had never crossed his mind. His name felt like an afterthought in comparison to the person before him. Benjamin walked down the corridors of the hospital as he was paged for a consult on a new case of a man within his mid-twenties that was suffering from fatigue, difficulty breathing, and a high fever. It was what felt like another Tuesday in Benjamin’s world as these were the everyday symptoms of the patients that he saw. Benjamin knew the stages that would follow the chronic symptoms. Next would come a series of night sweats, genital and anal sores, a rash that would spread across the body, pneumonia, and then a loss of memory. It was a new reality for society and nothing could bring them or Benjamin back to a time when they did not know the destruction of AIDs. Benjamin walked to the room to which he was paged and read the medical chart. The patient’s name was Matthew Foster, a twenty-four-year-old male, who presented with an elevated and irregular heart rate, high blood pressure, a fever of 110 degrees, fatigue, and asthmatic-like symptoms. The patient had initially thought they had caught the flu, but once they began to notice difficulty breathing and later collapsed in the supermarket, he was brought to Saint Francis Memorial Hospital.

Benjamin flipped to the last page of the medical chart and noticed that not only was the section denoting next of kin empty, but the patient had also signed a DNR. Benjamin opened the door to find a man wearing a linen medical gown laying on the hospital bed. The blankets were strewn about. The man was unconscious but had a ventilator covering his face. From what Benjamin could see of him, the patient’s cheeks had begun to hollow out as most patients’ had, and his skin had begun to take on a greyish color. The lights were off and the blinds were shut, but Benjamin could see the subtle convulsing of the patient’s brows and the dampness of his hair. Benjamin had grown accustomed, almost desensitized, to this image.

He took note of the man’s vitals and sat on the stool that was beside him, writing down an update in the man’s medical chart and storing it away. Almost as if sensing the doctor’s presence, the patient began to stir; he opened his eyes to the white lab coat, blue button-up, and red tie that was a common uniform for doctors. Benjamin drew the blinds and allowed the patient to get settled into the new light before he turned on the fluorescent lights and looked at him. The flames of the man’s hair were drowned out by sweat and though Benjamin sensed he knew the man before him, he could not place the tired and almost limp body that lay peering up at him.

“Hey, Mr. Important,” Matthew said with a slight smirk that only he knew was there due to the ventilator that covered his mouth.





DRAG

Story Hour



Tilia Cordata

It's a warm summer day, picture it. The words COVID 19 have never been uttered, people are eating and sitting together, closer than 6'. The Dewitt mall has people coming in for food, antiques and on this special Sunday, Drag Performers.

Drag Story hour at the time was occurring on the last Sunday of every month. My partner in literacy, Coraline Chardonnay, and I would arrive a bit before the kiddos and their parents. We'd browse through the books; decide on themes and potential lessons we could talk about. We might talk about language, culture, science, but most often we talked about belonging.

Coraline and I, decades older than the kids that we were reading to, often talked about how wild it is that this event exists. That open and loud queer people were able to choose, not from one or a handful, but from a plethora of books that talked about queer identities, loving yourself as you are, and the process of "finding yourself". These were things that did not exist or barely existed when we were kids.

This day we decided to read two books that were released together, titled "Maiden and Princess" and "Prince and Knight". As a fantasy nerd myself I was ecstatic that there were kids' stories in that realm that not just mentioned queer people but centered them in the story.

After we finished reading the books, where a brave knight saves a prince from a dragon (without killing it), and a maiden meets and falls in love with a princess, at a ball meant to find the prince a wife, a regular of our event raised her hand.

"Those stories are really important to me." She says without a pause "because – because I have two mommies and I don't get to see stories that have two girls falling in love. It's really important."

Coraline and I looked at each other. That single statement from a kid summed up so much. We had to raise our books to cover our faces for a moment as tears welled up in our eyes.

Another day, similar set up. A kid comes in wearing a dress. Not unusual for our event in the springtime. This kid and their mother came up to us after, the child peaking around the mother's legs.

"Don't you want to say hi?" The mom asked the child. The kid continued to watch from behind. Kids not knowing how to react to us was not unusual. I mean we are 6' tall or taller goddesses with multicolored hair and lots of makeup. "Ok, that's fine" the mom turns to us "This is our first time here, thank you so much for doing this. He saw you last month when we were passing through and today came to me and said 'Mommy! I want to go to the bookstore where the Big Boys wear dresses!'"

Often when I speak at events, or mentor queer kids the phrase "it does get better" seems like it is not enough, it seems fake or hollow. But I remember these events, among bunches more that caused me to tear up and even cry through my makeup. These kids show me that things have gotten better. These events that parents choose to come to with their young children mean things have gotten better. People are afraid of what they do not know, but they are beginning to know us now. We still have work to do, so much work. But I hope that these kids have a little less.

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