QUEER IN POLAND: AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

I've always believed in woman's intuition. It told me what to do or say, and when. As my confidante, I chose a girlfriend from my year, and not one I was particularly close with. She showed curiosity about others, and that tipped the scales. I remember seeing her in my room on the twelfth floor. I struggled to push out one word after another. She listened attentively. She asked questions.

I have a wonderful 11-year-old daughter, who's like a carbon copy of me, my real self (for example she says: "Daddy, when we go to a shop together, why don't you do your eye make-up?"

I write this now, I decided to write this because of the campaign of hate against LGBT+ during the presidential elections. Because the announcement for the contest said this text will be recorded somewhere, may be read by someone. And this is crucial because you sometimes need someone to tell you it's gonna get better. Teenage me, afraid of what it meant to be a lesbian, lacking any support, living in a small town, really needed that before I became current me.

It was all settled: I'd found the girl of my dreams; the moment came for me to out myself to my mother. She reacted in stellar fashion: she said she loved me whatever happened. There was no need to come out to the rest of the family. By that time, my step-father was already dead; I have no contact with my brothers; and more distant relatives heard about me from my mother. I think she told everyone she knew. All her friends accepted it as

Sometimes I feel sad that my parents don't love me, but that's okay. Not everyone has to love their child.

It was then I decided to tell my parents because I had to sue them to change my ID card. They took it badly mother cried father threw me out. I felt horrible bad I felt guilty. I saw them a year later a bit more willing to accept reality but still distrustful and frustrated with my visit. Mother told me to hide from the neighbours so that they didn't talk. When I went out with the dog and walked the country road people came out of their houses to look at me. I understood then there was nothing wrong with me. It's the people in Poland that are prejudiced against anyone who is a little bit different. In court I dealt with everything myself, my parents didn't show up. I drove to Wrocław overnight with my girlfriend 5 minutes and it's done. I called and said it's all settled. Mother hung up. More months of silence. In

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HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG
WARSAW
Poland

In June 2020 the Research Center for LGBT+ History and Identities at the Institute of Applied Social Sciences, University of Warsaw, in cooperation with the Heinrich Böll Foundation Warsaw, announced a contest for autobiographies and diaries of queer people. 184 authors took part, sending their texts from various places in Poland and abroad. This volume includes English translations of 23 of them.

These are the administrative regions of Poland in which the authors lived at the time of writing:

☛

What follows is a reproduction of a few selected pages from the diary of Tomasz Trzeciak, who documented his move from Poland to Denmark in a huge notebook (12 × 16 inches) with a cover made from black spangles (for the translation of his notes, see the page on the back of the cover).

Translations of the texts legible in our selection of the pages from Tomasz Trzeciak's diary:

☛ "I'm writing this while manic. I'm queer and LGBT. Little bit of everything," Tomasz writes next to the page with "bitch i'm iconic".

☛ "Jealousy," reads the word hidden under the brown tape.

☛ "Dear Diary / ENTERTAINMENT! / PLEASURE / I LIKE TO INDULGE MYSELF / SEE YA," Tomasz writes on the page next to the shiny circle in a square.

☛ The next two pages feature fragments from several pages of Tomasz's diary. Above the "feelings" sticker, Tomasz writes "Today I woke up inside a void, and did what is NOT a habit of mine in cleaning the house a bit. Yes, I'm messy but girl—nobody got time for that. My boyfriend went to a party without me and hasn't picked up since."

☛ Above the entry from August 17 Tomasz writes: "I'm so fucked up... I feel like sinking into the ground, I want some stability, but I keep running into other people's drama that gets to me, too. I feel as if some kind of breakthrough is going to happen, something that I waited for, I don't know what, but I already feel grateful for it." And under August 17 he writes: "I feel lost again and the only thing I want is a job."

☛ In the entry for August 18 we read: "I feel a dissonance and I want to live in a shack somewhere in the German countryside. People in Poland call my boyfriend 'bamboo', but I don't tell him because I want him to love Poland. I'm officially a messed up girl. My boyfriend is shuffling cards and I'm writing this diary, drinking my wine."

☛ Next is a section criss-crossed with silver tape. The visible fragments read: "Problem ... but I will not let others treat me bad ... It's hard not to feel when you hear those sorts of comments all the time."

☛ There's one section scribbled with a crayon, taken from a page next to the one with Tomasz's "patch family" sketched on it (we combined them here)—it reads: "Departure on Monday, and I'm saying goodbye to the people I know. Some of them didn't even say 'good luck', a terrible statement about our relationship. I wish not to be hurt I don't want to be hurt the way I was in the past. I want Andreas for the rest of my life / Please don't hurt me / Please / My heart will burst."

☛ The schedule for the week of Tomasz's move states: "Wednesday—suitcase, recruitment task, Decathlon / Thursday—laundry / Friday—partay, Monika and grandma / Saturday—cleaning, phone Tomek / Sunday—Busia and Grandpa, packing / Monday—flight." Below, Tomasz writes: "I will work nightshifts in Decathlon XD."

PISZĘ TO PODCZAS MANII.
JESTEM QUEER I LGBT.
WSZYSTKO PO TROCHU.
TOMASZ TRZECIAK
17.04.1997

bitch
I'm
iconic

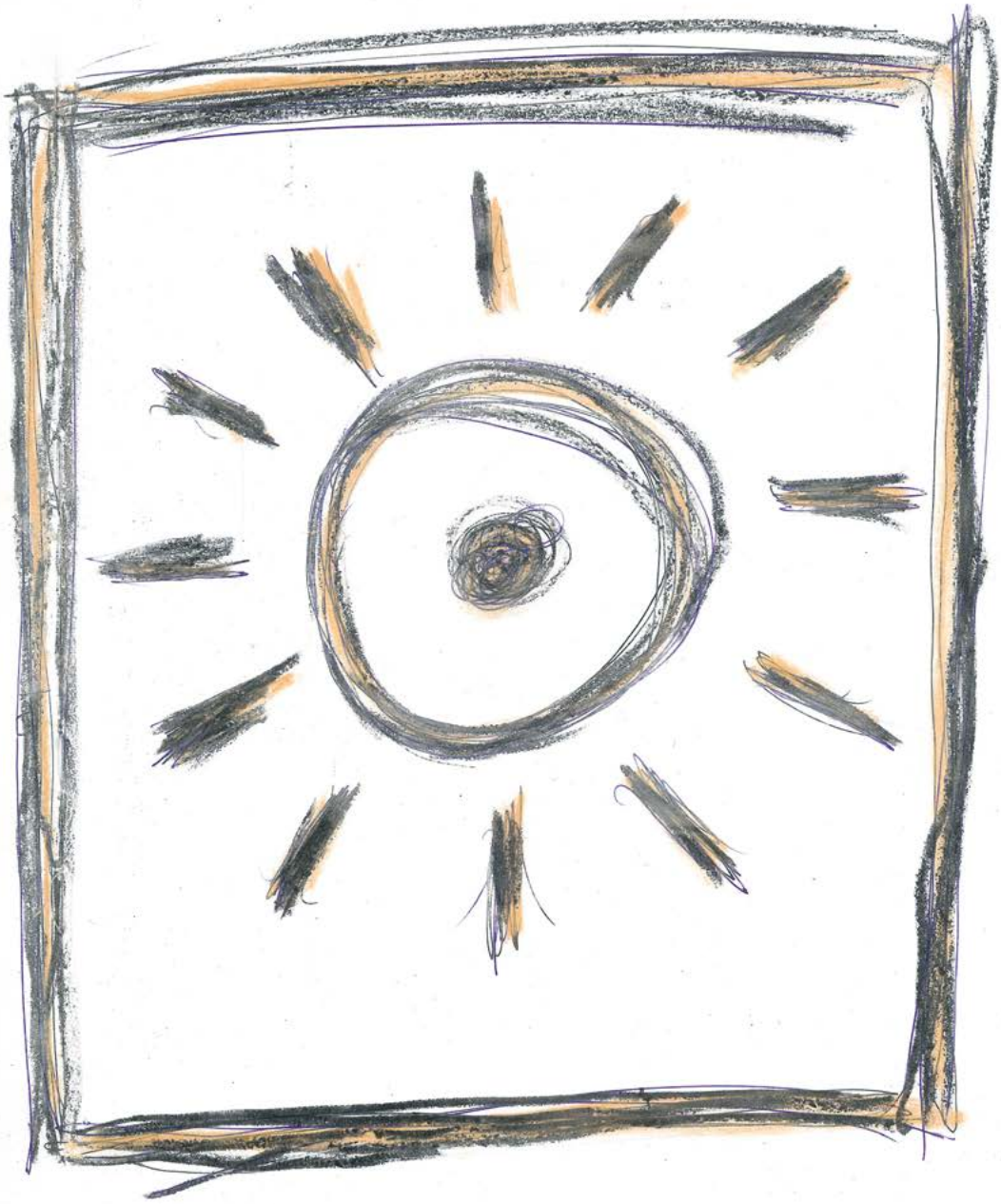
Drogi pamiętniczku

ROZRYWKA!

PRZYJEMNOŚĆ

LUBIĘ SIĘ ROZPIESZCZAĆ

NARAZIE!

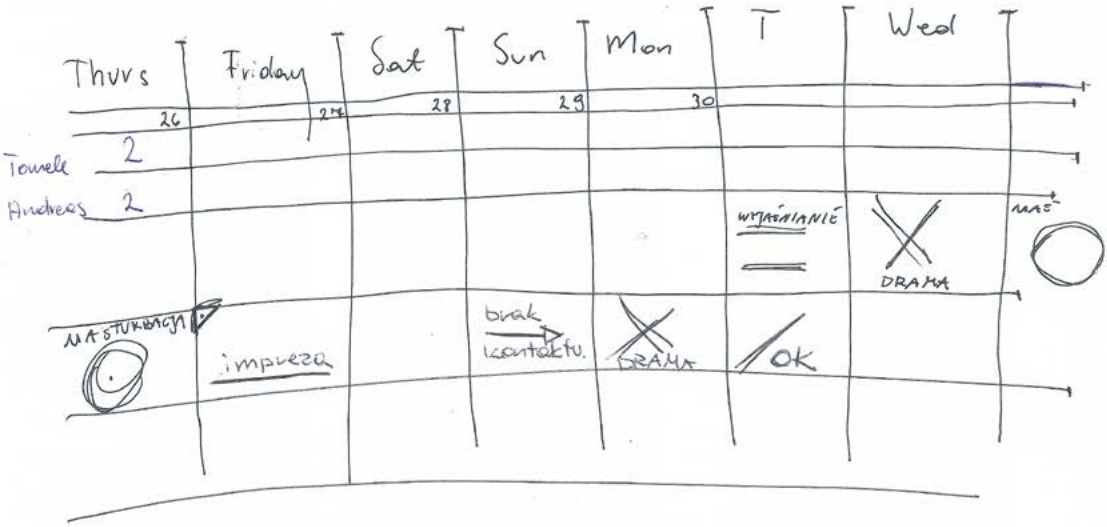


Dzisiaj obudziłem się piwnikuiczty pustkowa, i
tak jak NIE w moim zwyczaju - pospierałem troche
dzień. Jestem bardzo wierzący, ale gurl - nie mam
czasu.

Mój chłopak być na imprezie bez mnie i do tej
pory nie odszedł.

I would like to say that my boyfriend
must become my husband!

Andreas... I was waiting for Andrzej,
I was calling him, I tattooed him,
and here you are. My God sent you
to me!



60 zł październik - ~~marzec~~ marzec

gaz ~~60~~ 30 zł ; 60

" Tarcie 90/2 = 45

najem = 900 + 80 co

671 + energia, gaz, media

15 AUG 2020

00:46

PERFECT DAY

PLANS FOR TODAY

- 10:00 alarm
- 10:30 coffee and cigz & making breakfast
- 11:30 making KILISINDRI
- 14:00 YouTube, video, lunch
- 19:00 beach in Gdynia Kersss

Jak' jiendobrzyj

Mam ochotę rozpłakać się, chociażby ze stabilności
a na każdym kroku znajomego jakiegoś
dramatu, który na mnie wpływa. Czuję jakbym
znowu coś się miała przeżywać
wydarzyć, na co czekałem i nie wiem w
co to jeszcze, ale już jestem wdzięczny.

17 AUG
17:14

Pomimo czuję, że jestem zagubiony i jedyne czego chcę
to pracować.

13 AUG
22:00

Odkurzam dywanik i chcę zamieszkać w budce na jakiejś niemieckiej wsi. Ludzie w Polsce mezpiecznej majątku „bambus", ale mu tego nie mówię, by pokochał Polskę.

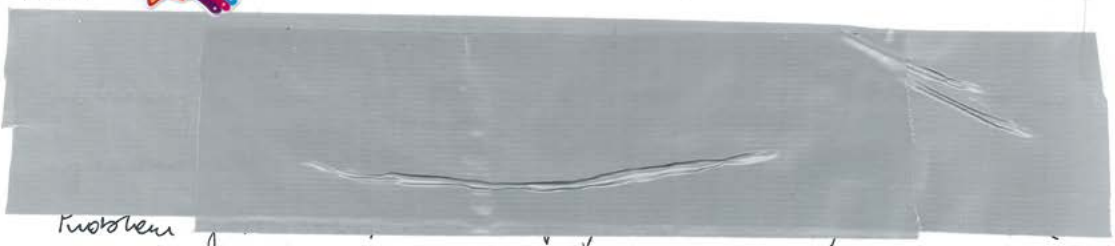
Oficjalnie jestem jedzięta.

Mój chłopak trenuje karty, a ja piszę ten pamiętnik i piję wino.

Tomek	Aziz	Tomek	Aziz	T	A
		245	450	75	25
-65	100	300	535	25	155
-130	170	375		110	95
-60	170			150	250
5	135			155	335
70	175			210	405
145	135			230	470
100	245				
185	225				
105	300				
200	365				

Aziz's
game
A
TCANCELLED

20.08.2020
14:05



Problem

ja nie będę dawać sobie pomiarać.

Trudno jest jej wie czyć, skoro tak nie koncentrację podejmuje non stop.

PIATCIT FAMILY

AZIZ - KILL - Tomek - MAREK

ANIA — MAJA — PIOTR — MONIKA — MICHAŁ

IWONA — ANDRZEJ — EWA — X — MAMA MICHAŁA

4. SEP 2020
13:17

W poniedziałek wyjdę, ja się zepnę ze znajomymi.

Niektórzy mi powiedzieli nawet „powodzenia",
a to słusznie świadczy o naszej znajomości.

Chciałbym nie być zmienionym, jak kiedyś.
Chcę Andrzeja na całe życie.

Proszę nie zmień mnie.

Proszę.

Serce mi pęknie.

ŚR	CZW	PT	SOB	NIEDZ.	PON
WALIZKA ZADANIE REKR. Decathlon	PRANIE	IMPRESSKA Monika i BARCIA	SPRZĄT. TOMEK TEL	BUSIA i DZIADZIUŚ PAKOWANIE	WYLOT

Będę pracować w Decathlonie na nocke xD

Edited by
Łukasz Mikołajewski and Piotr Laskowski

QUEER IN POLAND: AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

Selected submissions to the contest for queer autobiographies organised by Julia Bednarek, Piotr Laskowski, Sebastian Matuszewski, Łukasz Mikołajewski, and Michał Sobczak

Translated by
Antoni Górny and Krzysztof Heymer

Heinrich Böll Foundation Warsaw
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Queer in Poland: Autobiographies
Commissioned and published by the
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Edited by Łukasz Mikołajewski and Piotr Laskowski

Translated by Antoni Górny (introduction, texts no. 3—4, 7, 10, 12, 14, 17, 21)
and Krzysztof Heymer (texts no. 1—2, 5—6, 8—9, 11, 13, 15—16, 18—20, 22—23)

Linguistic editing and proofreading: Kate Kingsford

The contest for queer autobiographies was organized in 2020 in cooperation with Heinrich Böll Foundation Warsaw by Julia Bednarek, Piotr Laskowski, Sebastian Matuszewski, Łukasz Mikołajewski, and Michał Sobczak, within the framework of the Research Center for LGBT+ History and Identities, Institute of Applied Social Sciences, University of Warsaw. Write us: pracownia.lgbt@uw.edu.pl

Graphic design: Wojtek Janikowski, based on the graphic design of the Polish anthology *Cała siła, jaką czerpię na życie. Świadectwa, relacje, pamiętniki osób LGBTQ+* published in 2022 by Karakter (many thanks to all the team at Karakter!).

The images on the cover are: various graphic elements from Tomasz Trzeciak's diary; a handwritten draft of a fable sketched by the author using the pen name "Facet Dumnie Homoseksualny" (A Proudly Homosexual Guy—the full text is available in *Cała siła, jaką czerpię na życie*).

Project coordination Heinrich Böll Foundation Warsaw:
Aleksandra Janowska, Katarzyna Pabijanek, Gert Röhrborn

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Preface

LGBT+ is us. It's your uncle, your neighbour, your classmate, your employee. It's who you buy food from at the grocery. It's who you meet at a cafe or in the waiting room at a doctor's office. It's who pays the same taxes as you. It's who has the same political views as you and who sees the world the same way you do.

It's who writes diaries.

What makes them "them" is access to rights. The love of LGBT+ people in Poland is taboo; it's whispered about over Christmas Eve supper, railed against by a passer-by, looked at scornfully by neighbours, or cast out of the home by a father who couldn't stand the presence of someone who didn't "look normal." When LGBT+ people visit hospitals, they aren't told how their loved ones are doing. When they file taxes, they can't do it with their loved ones. They can't marry the person they love. They are systematically oppressed by the institutions of the state, and this gives rise to public hatred from society, family, the Church.

As we read these diaries of LGBT+ people, we may see ourselves in them, but also much more. They speak of the carelessness of youth and the joy of first loves, but also of the bitter pain of everyday life, the hatred and aggression that leads to tragedy. The stories that you'll find here have been lived, and the ones who tell them are those who lived them. The image they paint can terrify, but it also testifies to the will to live and to fight for one's own identity.

The situation of non-heteronormative people in Poland is cause for alarm. This is plain to see in the reports of Polish LGBT+ organisations, as well as in the ILGA-Europe ranking, where Poland has been ranked in last place of all countries in the European Union since 2020. Experts also stress that in Poland homophobia is intertwined with a systemic, institutionalised discrimination of LGBT+ people. If this is to change, we need to speak about it as loudly as we can.

The diaries of LGBT+ people contained in this volume are the result of a pioneering research effort by the Research Center for LGBT+ History and Identities, a part of the Institute for Applied Social Sciences at the University of Warsaw, with support from the Heinrich Böll Foundation

in Warsaw. Supporting and implementing projects aimed at combating the rise of homophobia and transphobia is a part of the stated purpose of our Foundation and speaks to a desire to engage in the defence of universal human rights—freedom, dignity, equality, and democracy.

Let us rest awhile and listen to these very personal histories.

Joanna Maria Stolarek
Director of the Heinrich Böll Foundation Warsaw

Introduction: Black Spangles

Two photo booth snapshots glued to the first page of a notebook, among colourful stickers from a gadget store with little pictures of smiley emoticons, unicorns, and rainbows. Beside one of the photos, a few sentences in ballpoint: "I'M WRITING THIS WHILE MANIC. I'M QUEER AND LGBT. LITTLE BIT OF EVERYTHING. TOMASZ TRZECIAK 17.04.1997." The right-hand page carries massive letters sketched in many-coloured markers, proclaiming in English: "bitch i'm iconic."

This is the opening to one of the 184 diaries we received in 2020, as submissions to a contest for LGBT+ autobiographies. What makes this document stand out among the many others is the fact that it is the only one to have reached us not as an electronic file, but as an extravagant and stylish item: a massive journal bound in a cover of black spangles. Full of drawings, collages, and assemblages, the notebook documents in real time the emigration of its author from Poland to Denmark, at a moment in time that proved extremely difficult for LGBT+ people in Poland: summer 2020. At the time, the presidential campaign — already in progress when our contest was announced — saw anti-LGBT+ rhetoric become the primary driver of Andrzej Duda's (ultimately successful) pursuit of reelection. The hateful language of the campaign, as well as state violence aimed against queer activists who tried to resist, left a substantial mark on nearly all of the diaries.

As for Tomasz Trzeciak, his writings are not a record of the subsequent stages of an intensifying victimisation, although he states openly that he has had his fill of Poland and that he would recommend leaving to anyone. Instead, the pages of his notepad are filled with hand-drawn tables with his weekly schedules, poker scorecards for games played with friends, notes of encouragement written in moments of doubt and psychological hardship, and scribbles meant to help him commit to memory the menu of a restaurant where he found employment after leaving Poland (see picture insert).

Other autobiographies reached us as electronic files, some also including illustrations, many communicating the same psychological strain of growing up LGBT+ in Poland (such as the hand-written draft of a fable an

author wrote for himself as a teen to survive in a world that had no room for people like them; a photograph of a corridor in a psychiatric hospital; or a suicide note to a mother). What connects them to Tomasz Trzeciak's black-spangled notebook is that virtually all of them are written in a language and style that is as individual, personal, and unique as a person's handwriting — and also that nearly every diary describes the author's childhood and life in a country where the very existence of the LGBT+ community is deliberately overlooked and where the spread of knowledge about them is deliberately prevented; a country where institutions of the state either do not recognise LGBT+ people or are actively hostile to them. What connects these diaries is also the fact that they register the tension between consciousness of the impact that public hostility, enforced silence, and closeted existence has had on the individual lives and psychological health of the authors and their need to share their stories of gradual emancipation (and the relief and joy that accompany it) from the demand for silence about oneself and from the prejudice and the lies that pervade the public discourse. For each of the texts in this volume is a story of the daily struggle to be oneself, and a testament to the strength with which queer[1] people build their own lives, most often against the pressure of the communities they live in.

The contest

The contest for LGBT+ autobiographies was announced in the summer of 2020 by the Research Centre for LGBT+ History and Identities at the Institute of Applied Social Sciences of the University of Warsaw. It was made possible thanks to the involvement and support of the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Warsaw.

What inspired us to call the contest was the tradition of sociological competitions for autobiographies that had developed in Poland during the inter-war period, when the Institute of Social Economics (Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego) in Warsaw collected and published hundreds of autobiographical narratives in Polish, written by those whose voices had not been heard before: the unemployed during the Great Depression, the peasants, and the emigrants. Anthologies of these autobiographies

1 As conscious as we are of the historical and political distinctions involved in the acronym "LGBT+" and the self-identification as a "queer," here we use those terms largely as synonyms. This is inspired by a desire to highlight the commonality of social and political conditions, which — as the texts in this volume indicate with the utmost clarity — does not contradict a diversity of strategies and identities.

remain classics of Polish sociology to this day.[2] At the same time, the Institute for Jewish Research (YIVO) in Vilnius organised a series of contests to inspire Jewish youths to record their memories, commit to paper their dreams and their personal setbacks, and thus lent a hand to the creation of a unique set of texts that serves today as an invaluable historical resource for understanding the perspective of members of an oppressed minority who grew up in a society in which the majority denied them many rights.[3]

"Be not ashamed of what you have lived through. Speak with confidence. Write frankly, from the heart, as if you were telling your sorrows to a dear friend," instructed the organisers of a competition for memoirs of Polish émigrés in the 1930s.[4] Researchers from YIVO told the participants in their contests: "Do not think that 'trifles' aren't important," encouraging the authors to focus their recollections on details from their own lives and from their surroundings, rather than on broad assertions.[5] Thus, when we shared the news of our contest for diaries by LGBT+ people across the social channels of LGBT+ organisations in Poland and of the *Replika* queer magazine, we also stressed "that there is no such thing as an unimportant experience." Using the slogan "Let's write our history!" we gave voice to the conviction that the primary means by which queer history is written — as is true of any other history of a group that is denied rights and reduced to minority status[6] — is through the creation of a space in

2 For more on the tradition of inter-war sociological diaries, see: Katherine Lebow 'The Conscience of the Skin: Interwar Polish Autobiography and Social Rights', *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 3 (2012), 297–313. The brand of sociology based on written testimonies drew inspiration from the monumental study by William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (Boston, 1919–1920). One of its volumes is comprised of the autobiography of a Polish peasant emigrant, Władysław Wiśniewski.

3 For a great introduction to the traditions of the YIVO and the inter-war autobiography contests for youth, see: Leila Zenderland, 'Social Science as a "Weapon of the Weak": Max Weinreich, the Yiddish Scientific Institute, and the Study of Culture, Personality, and Prejudice', *Isis* 4 (2013), 742–772. We also recommend the beautiful graphic novel by Ken Krimstein, *When I Grow Up: The Lost Autobiographies of Six Yiddish Teenagers* (Bloomsbury: New York, 2021).

4 *Pamiętniki emigrantów. Ameryka Południowa* (Warszawa: Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego, 1939), xi.

5 *Jedies fun YIVO* [YIVO newsletter in Yiddish] 1–3 (1934), 6.

6 Here, we mark out the heteronorm as being the majority in the sense that it disciplines, homogenises, and contravenes the expression of queer experiences with the explicit purpose of maintaining the illusion of a unified and predominant majority, in lieu of the much more complex and variegated reality where "the majority" and "the minority" are much harder (and less useful) to define. In this understanding of "the majority" and "the minority," we draw inspiration — among others — from the philosophical understanding of these terms advanced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: "The opposition between

which silenced and repressed experiences, buried under a thick layer of hate and stereotyping, can finally be expressed without restraint. In contrast to the traditional sociological interview, what we sought was for the writers to be able to compose the accounts of their experiences according to their wishes, writing without the constraint of predetermined length, focusing on any topics they considered pertinent, writing under the name or pseudonym of their choice (or none at all). Even though we appended a list of questions to our announcement to help in the writing (the list is presented in this volume after the introduction), we also encouraged the authors to disregard them if other ones seemed of greater interest — to use the contest as an opportunity to tell their stories exactly as they wanted them told: in their own way.

The texts that we were entrusted with came primarily from young and very young persons. Of the 184 authors, as many as forty were aged 15–20, more than sixty were in the 21–25 age bracket, and upwards of thirty were aged 26–30. Only a dozen or so of the diaries came from authors aged 40 and over. The events that coincided with the contest inspired LGBT+ youth in Poland with a desire to speak out about their lives with courage and frankness, without self-censorship. The voices of teenagers and twenty-somethings are countered by stories from authors over 30, who used the opportunity to take stock of what one of the authors describes as the attempts to "play the normie," to adapt to the expectations of the majority (primarily through "tactful" silence).

Significantly, many of the diaries came from persons from small towns and from the countryside, where LGBT+ voices are even less likely to be heard and the sense of isolation is much more palpable than in major cities. Many authors currently living in metropolitan areas describe their experiences of growing up in a small town. Sixteen of the diaries — the one by Tomasz Trzeciak among them — arrived from outside of Poland. They offer a unique insight into the experience of emigration, one that is shared by many queer people all over the world.

As the first diaries came in, we immediately realised that we were being entrusted with a veritable treasure trove and that our primary task was to make it accessible to as many readers as possible. On the one hand, these

minority and majority is not simply quantitative ... . Majority assumes a state of power and domination ..., the standard measure ... . That is why we must distinguish between: the majoritarian as a constant and homogenous system; minorities as subsystems; and the minoritarian as a potential, creative and created, becoming." Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 105–106.

were accounts of experiences beyond the consciousness of most heteronormative and cis-normative Poles. On the other, even more importantly for the authors, the diaries were written as statements of solidarity and support, as a personal address to other LGBT+ people — a signal that they are not really alone, even if they do not see anyone like themselves in their own communities. As one of the authors, 24-year old Kamil Wajda, puts it, "I really want for the person who reads this to know that there is no such thing as a hopeless situation. Even when the world crumbles and all you can think of is dying, there is at least one place you can call home, and at least one person who will candidly and disinterestedly root for you …. Let it be known to others that they are not alone in all this." An anonymous 19-year old opens her diary in the following manner: "I mulled over it for a long time, whether my own story could ever be interesting for anyone else, but then I realised it doesn't have to. I'll make sure, anyway, that at least one other person reads this and gets that lightbulb moment, thinking 'oh, and here I was thinking I was alone with this'."

What these texts speak to, that desire to share one's experience by writing one's own story so that it can help others, inspired us to release a substantial number of the submissions we archived at the Manuscripts Department of the University of Warsaw Library, sharing selected diaries by as many means as possible. The first edition of selected diaries came out in November 2021 through the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Warsaw, who helped us organise the contest. The volume, entitled *Pamiętniki osób LGBTQIA+. Mała antologia* (Diaries of LGBTQIA+ People: A Small Anthology), collects eighteen diaries and has appeared both in print and online, available for free.[7] Texts from this collection were read by six actors in a series of radio programmes and podcasts prepared with Radio TOK FM, conceived and produced by Katarzyna Szustow. The Heinrich Böll Foundation also published online and print editions of a German translation of seven diaries as *"Pamiętniki". Erfahrungen von LGBT+ in Polen*.[8] In 2022, the Karakter publishing house released a "big" anthology that weighed in at 1.5 kilograms, numbering a thousand pages and comprising as many as 79 diaries, as well as illustrations from a dozen of the submissions, under the title *Cała siła, jaką czerpię na życie. Świadectwa, pamiętniki, relacje osób LGBTQ+* (All the Strength I Have for Living: Testimonies, Diaries, and Accounts by LGBTQ+ People). Several months later, the same

7 The electronic version of the anthology is available at: https://pl.boell.org/pl/2021/11/15/pamietniki-osob-lgbtqia.

8 Available at: https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/2023-01/pamietniki-lgbt-in-polen.pdf.

publisher released a stand-alone volume of another diary submitted to our contest, written by Patryk Pufelski, employee of the Wrocław zoo and a gay man, which also depicts his Jewish family history, under the title *Pawilon małych ssaków* (Small Mammals Pavilion). The publication of both of the anthologies was accompanied by meet-the-authors events in many cities across Poland, involving both the authors and the editors. The meetings, suffused in emotions, from pain and disquiet to relief and joy, also provided space for the formation of a unique community of people who did not know one another before, yet who shared similar experiences and saw themselves in those texts. One moment that symbolised the emergence of that community occurred when, during a meeting at a literary festival where the authors were reading aloud fragments of their own diaries, one of the authors was so overcome with emotions that he could no longer read. Another promptly picked up where he stopped, her readiness to act helping him carry the burden of heart-wrenching memories he had committed to paper.

Poland: a backlash without a revolution

In her review of the *Cała siła, jaką czerpię na życie* anthology, esteemed Polish writer Renata Lis observes:

> After three, four hundred pages, I suddenly realised: this is a mass indictment. Allowed to speak for the first time on such a scale, ... the rainbow people are using their own voice, according to their own rules, to give evidence against Poland. They charge it for the state, religious, and domestic homophobia that transforms so easily into hatred. For a life in constant fear and solitude. For the debasement and the violence. For the suicides of children and teenagers that were not prevented. For the self-harm and suicide attempts. For the unimaginable torment of trans persons. For the denial of access to the security provided by marriage. For systemic discrimination in access to IVF and adoption. For having to struggle against institutions over PESEL [personal identification] numbers or passports for children of rainbow parents. In other words: for the fact that non-heteronormative persons cannot call Poland their home.[9]

9 Renata Lis, 'Oskarżamy' [We accuse], *Książki. Magazyn do czytania*, February 2022, 10–15. The following year, the author went on to publish her own (queer) autobiography, a seminal work — in multiple ways — for Polish non-fiction writing. See: Renata Lis, *Moja ukochana i ja* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2023).

These diaries are a queer looking-glass for Poland. To help understand references to events and statements present within them, which comprise a record of systemic homophobia and transphobia that had left an indelible mark on the lives of the authors, we will use the following few pages to briefly outline the legal situation of LGBT+ people in Poland. We will begin with a historical overview to explain how the hate campaign of the summer of 2020 happened. Then, we will discuss in greater detail the events of that period, referring specifically to those that are mentioned in the diaries. Finally, we will provide a short summation of what the diaries identify as sources of support, hope, and strength for the struggle.

For several years now, Poland has been described as one of the worst countries in the entire European Union when it comes to the legal situation of LGBT+ people; one could even say that it has progressively worsened over the course of the past three decades. Interestingly, this has not always been the case. Historically speaking, homosexuality tended to be overlooked by the state rather than repressed. This is true of both the inter-war period and the aftermath of World War II, when Poland became a part of the Eastern Bloc. The first Polish penal code, instituted in 1932, decriminalised homosexual relations, thus nullifying laws that had been in effect in both the Russian, German, and Austrian partition. Though the background of this change is complex and ambiguous,[10] the decriminalisation was notably preceded by scientific research — groundbreaking in the Polish context — geared toward the comprehension and emancipation of LGBT+ people, represented by such publications as Leon Wachholz's *Krytyczne uwagi w sprawie uranicznego poczucia płciowego* (Critical Remarks on Uranic Sexual Sentiments), published as early as 1899, or studies by Franciszek Ludwik Neugebauer, who earned the status of foremost global authority on intersexuality around the turn of the twentieth century. His monograph *Hermaphroditismus beim Menschen* (Hermaphroditism among Men), published in 1908, has served for a long time as a standard manual and the final word of medical science on the matter. Neugebauer's articles and literature reviews published in Magnus Hirschfeld's *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen* (Yearbook of

10 As Kamil Karczewski demonstrates convincingly, the depenalisation of homosexuality may have been driven not so much by the pursuit of sexual emancipation as a preference for the maintenance of legal invisibility of an issue in the name of "proper mores" and the defence of the good name of the elites. See: Kamil Karczewski, 'Transnational Flows of Knowledge and the Legalisation of Homosexuality in Interwar Poland', *Contemporary European History*, online first, 21 October 2022, 1–18.

Intermediate Sexual Types) identified 2,000 cases of intersexuality in existing studies. In the following generation, in 1937, renowned Polish obstetrician Henryk Beck conducted gender correction surgery on athlete Witold Smentek, which was widely reported in the press and then discussed in detail by the patient himself in his autobiography.

Homosexuality was not criminalised after World War II, even though it had been illegal in the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin since 1934. Thus, while the penal code of USSR and Russia had its article 121, and Germany (both East and West) retained their infamous article 175 until the 1960s (in West Germany, its remnants were still in effect in 1994), the Polish state did not actively persecute homosexuals, and from the 1960s sexual transition surgery was available under the socialist regime.[11]

At the same time — not so much in spite of as because of that — homosexuality and transsexuality were subjected to a different type of repression, forced into silence as causes for shame, ridicule, scandal, or moral outrage. Paradoxically, the absence of open state repression successfully prevented the politicisation of psychosexual identity, or even its open expression. Thus, the major changes that had affected the West since the 1960s largely passed Poland by. The youth revolt of 1968 was directed more against Soviet domination than toward sexual liberation. As a result, the sixties revolutionaries who took power after 1989 proved entirely insensitive to the problem of discrimination based on sex or psychosexual identity.

Even as this was the case, the backlash of the 1980s reached Poland, too, producing what might be called a backlash without the emancipation, a phenomenon common to both the 1980s and the 2020s. While the subsequent waves of backlash in the West represent a reaction to the progress of emancipatory politics, their concurrent arrival in Poland follows periods of stagnation of a silent status quo. During the 1980s, at the time of the HIV/AIDS moral panic stoked by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, the first ever mass police action against homosexual men, codenamed "Hyacinth," took place in Poland. At the behest of the Interior Minister, more than 10,000 men were arrested and subjected to humiliating

11 Maria Dębińska, 'Diagnosing transsexualism, diagnosing society', in: *Queers in State Socialism: Cruising 1970s Poland*, ed. Tomasz Basiuk and Jędrzej Burszta (London: Routledge, 2021), 59–73. Here, too, as Dębińska demonstrates also in her *Transpłciowość w Polsce. Wytwarzanie kategorii* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Archeologii i Etnologii Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2020), this history is not devoid of ambivalence: the courts and the sexologists arrived at the decisions for medical gender corrective surgery in a manner that betrayed their deeply homophobic convictions: we must help these people so that they can no longer fall in love with persons of the same sex.

interrogation with the use of threats and blackmail, and had personal files created. After 1989, not only did the Polish state fail to condemn the operation, but it also put the files it produced to unclear use. To this day, it is not known where these police materials are located and to what purposes they have been applied. At the same time, Operation Hyacinth became a turning point in the history of self-organisation of LGBT+ people. The informal groups fighting for the rights of homosexuals that emerged from this crisis provided the foundation for the first legal LGBT+ organisations in Poland after the political watershed of 1989.

The post-1989 transformation in Poland did not result in the emancipation of LGBT+ people. Though the political change made it possible to register LGBT+ associations and publish queer periodicals, it also reinforced the influence of the Catholic Church in the Polish democratic state. The third pillar of the global neoconservative revolution next to Reagan and Thatcher — John Paul II, the Polish Pope who sat on the throne in Rome from 1978 until his death in 2005 — successfully blocked all the tacit attempts at granting equal rights to anyone non-heteronormative. Under the influence of Church hierarchs, the plan to introduce a proscription against discrimination based on psychosexual orientation in the new Polish constitution (signed into law in 1997) was abandoned. At the same time, the constitution safeguards marriage understood as the union of a woman and a man.[12]

After 1989, the Catholic Church assumed a dominant role in the Polish public sphere. The manner in which the political transformation was implemented resulted in the collapse of local culture centres — libraries, cinemas, culture houses — in minor towns. The Church became the only institution still involved in organising social life outside of major cities; its influence reached into schools, and its endorsement was sought by politicians of all parties. Diaries submitted to our contest offer a unique record of the experience of growing up non-heteronormative in a world largely dominated by Catholic ideology. In small towns, churches are often the only widely accessible "cultural offer" and means of social integration beyond supermarkets — small ones, most of them part of the Żabka (Little Frog) franchise, and larger ones, mostly Biedronka (Ladybird).

12 It is debatable whether this stipulation absolutely negates the possibility of same-sex marriages or perhaps "just" secures special privileges for heterosexual unions. To this day, state authorities bring up the relevant article whenever they deny citizenship to children of same-sex marriages concluded in other countries. For more, see the 2017 documentary by activist Bart Staszewski, *Article 18*, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fCRBKkMETo.

In 1990, religious instruction was introduced in schools with the circumvention of parliamentary procedure. Under the influence of the Church, proper sexual education was abandoned, eventually replaced by a course on "education to family life" which denigrates any form of sexuality that is not marital sex for the purpose of reproduction. In 1993, a restrictive abortion law was passed; it was tightened even further in 2020, mere days after the conclusion of our contest. Gender-affirming procedures have also changed for the worse. Correction of data in personal documents is not regulated by an act of parliament but by the 1995 resolution of the Supreme Court, which requires that a trans person file a legal case against their parents, the charge being wrongful assignment of sex at birth. If the parents are no longer alive, the case must be filed against a trustee named by the state. An attempt to alter this procedure was made in 2015 by the liberal majority in the final weeks before its dismissal from power. However, the resulting law on gender confirmation was vetoed by the newly-elected President Andrzej Duda in his first official act as president.

Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004, concluded by a left--wing government and a leftist president, failed to bring about meaningful change in the situation of the LGBT+ community in the country. Under pressure from the EU, the Office of Government Plenipotentiary for the Equal Status of Women and Men was established, becoming the only institution safeguarding the rights of LGBT+ people between 2001 and 2005, but at the same time, to gain the support of the Church for the accession (which could only be secured through a national referendum), the parties then in power made guarantees that there would not be the kind of emancipation of LGBT+ people in Poland that had taken place in Western Europe in the 1990s (meaning primarily the introduction of civil unions). Thus, the left-dominated Sejm blocked the first proposed acts on civil unions in 2002 and 2003. The accession treaty was supplemented with a declaration that proclaimed: "The Government of the Republic of Poland understands that nothing in the provisions of the Treaty on European Union, of the Treaties establishing the European Communities and the provisions of treaties amending or supplementing those treaties prevents the Polish State in regulating questions of moral significance, as well as those related to the protection of human life."[13] These "questions

13 "Documents concerning the accession of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Estonia, the Republic of Cyprus, the Republic of Latvia, the Republic of Lithuania, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Malta, the Republic of Poland, the Republic of Slovenia and the Slovak Republic to the European Union," *Official Journal of the European Union* L 236, Vol. 46, 23 September 2003, English edition, 983.

of moral significance" amounted to the dismissal of all proposed anti-discriminatory acts and solutions to the Polish legal system. In the end, the only anti-discriminatory law in Poland that applies to matters of sexual orientation was introduced into the labour code under relentless pressure from EU negotiator Günter Verheugen.[14] In fact, to this day, LGBT+ people are not named as a group protected from discrimination in any act of Polish law — the constitution, the criminal code, or laws on education and public media — even as there are proscriptions against incitement to hatred based on religion, nationality, and ethnic or "racial" origin. Instead, the criminal code was expanded with the addition of an article criminalising "offence against religious sentiments," which would often come to be used to silence critique of institutions of the Church — for instance, performative transformation of religious symbols into signs of inclusion of the LGBT+ community. One famous but far from isolated example of such a practice was the creation of stickers with the image of the Virgin Mary beneath a rainbow-coloured halo, the authors of which were charged with offending religious sentiments. The LGBT+ community would respond to the charges by using the slogan "Rainbows don't offend," mentioned in several diaries found in this volume.

The failure to secure the rights of LGBT+ people in the period 1989–2005 was cashed in on by the right-wing Law and Justice party (PiS), which came to power for the first time in 2005. In 2005, it pushed a ban on the Pride Parade in Warsaw, attempting to block it. It enjoyed greater success in shredding *Kompas*, a textbook for education on human rights designed by the European Council. The animus against the textbook stemmed from the fact that it included the suggestion that representatives of LGBT+ organisations be invited to schools to participate in lessons about respect for gay people. In these circumstances, the LGBT+ community looked to the European Union, or, more broadly, the West, in the hope that new, European standards would eventually permeate to Poland. Meanwhile, the Polish state condemned LGBT+ people to soul-crushing solitude and insecurity as well as a complete denial of access to any reliable knowledge about themselves in schools. The diaries repeatedly use the metaphor of an ill-fitting puzzle, blocks that do not fit the image or that combine in an unusual way. An LGBT+ child in Poland had to look outside of the

14 Agnès Chetaille, 'Une "autre Europe" homophobe? L'Union européenne, le nationalisme polonais et la sexualisation de la "division Est/Ouest"', *Raisons politiques* 49, no. 1 (2013), 119–140. English version: 'Is the "Other Europe" Homophobic? The European Union, Polish Nationalism, and the Sexualization of the East/West Divide', Cairn.Info, 3 March 2014, https://www.cairn-int.info/journal-raisons-politiques-2013-1-page-119.htm.

country if they needed guidance for their own life and support in their own experiences.

For organisations fighting for LGBT+ rights, the main course of action became to highlight the standards of human rights accepted in the EU and the changes that took place within the European community during the 1990s. Strategically, the focus turned toward the similarities between LGBT+ people and the majority, rather than to areas of radical difference — to any departure from the norms and expectations of the majority. One symbol of this strategy is that the LGBT+ demonstrations in June are referred to as "Equality Parades," even though they are patterned after Prides and take place during Pride Month. The hope was that the pro-European, liberal camp would simply copy western solutions. On that score, the eight years under a liberal government (2007–2015) were a rude awakening. The first of these two four-year terms was marked by near-total silence about LGBT+ issues, combined with a demand for gratitude for the cessation of the open hostility of the years 2005–2007. At the same time, the new government retained the right not to apply the Charter of Fundamental Rights, a part of the Treaty of Lisbon that reformed the EU, in Poland. The 2011 parliamentary elections offered a clear indication that society was ready for a change; among the new members of the Sejm were Anna Grodzka, the first transgender representative and co-founder of the Transfuzja foundation for trans rights, and Robert Biedroń, a prominent gay activist as well as co-founder and president of Campaign Against Homophobia (Kampania Przeciw Homofobii), established in 2001. Yet, the liberal majority would not budge and a string of proposed acts on civil unions — a baseline demand of LGBT+ organisations — were either struck down or not admitted for debate in 2012–2015, even as civil unions had been legalised in the Czech Republic (in 2006) and in Hungary (in 2009). In Poland, even the act on the treatment of infertility, passed into law by the liberal majority in 2015, is tarnished by homophobia, since it denies access to IVF to women who are not in a relationship with a man.

Time of writing: The campaign of hate and new forms of resistance

Another electoral win for the right wing in autumn 2015 thus took place in an atmosphere soaked through with homophobia and transphobia. It also coincided with another stage in a global backlash. On the one hand, an anti-trans campaign had begun in the US and in the United Kingdom, waged primarily under the banner of "protecting the children." On the other, in 2013, Vladimir Putin's Russia had enacted a law "for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating a Denial of Traditional

Family Values," which was embraced enthusiastically by right-wing media in Poland. The watchword of "protecting the children" from "LGBT ideology" became a rallying cry for a campaign of hate instigated by the new government in 2019. It reached its peak in 2020, concurrently with our contest. Though the diaries we received tend to provide accounts of the entire life-stories of their authors, they are also vignettes of that peculiar moment which put these personal histories in stark relief.

The pretext for the campaign was the decision of the liberal President of Warsaw Rafał Trzaskowski to sign a declaration of support for LGBT+ people living in Warsaw, the first significant gesture of that kind by an elected official in Poland after 1989. Many local government bodies across Poland reacted by passing resolutions purportedly designed as a formal rebuke of the vaguely-defined "LGBT ideology," which actually served to inspire hatred toward non-heteronormative and non-cis-normative persons. The intention behind these resolutions was betrayed by a pro-government magazine, which included "LGBT-free zone" stickers in one of its print editions in July 2019, advising readers to use the stickers in various public spaces (the distribution of the stickers would later be halted by court order). The language the right came to use at that time did not even attempt to hide clear references to the darkest traditions of Polish nationalism and Catholicism, namely anti-Semitism: the boycotts of Jewish stores in the inter-war period and the aggressive demand for the exclusion of Jews from public spaces.[15]

During the same period, a Catholic foundation acquired several vans that were subsequently pasted with banners falsely claiming the existence of a connection between homosexuality and paedophilia, which it then dispatched into the streets of Polish cities. Equipped with megaphones constantly emitting hateful content about the LGBT+ community, the vans served as one of the tools used by the right ahead of the May 2019 elections to the European Parliament. However, that month, brothers Tomasz and Marek Sekielski published their documentary *Tell No One* (*Tylko nie mów nikomu*) on YouTube. An independent, crowdfunded production, the film shed light on the sexual crimes perpetrated by members of the Catholic clergy in Poland.

The hierarchs of the Church joined the hate campaign against LGBT+ folk with renewed vigour in summer 2019, in response to the registration

15 For more on anti-Semitism in pre-war Poland, see: Paul Brykczyński, *Primed for Violence: Murder, Antisemitism, and Democratic Politics in Interwar Poland* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016).

of the first-ever Equality Parade in Białystok. Bishops called for a blockade, with one even taking to the waves of a Catholic radio station to proclaim: "The time has come to fight! We can't and won't pull back any longer! We must present an organised defence." The march took place on 20 July 2019 and was viciously assaulted by nationalist militias. The first text of this anthology, an anonymous diary of a non-binary person who grew up in Białystok and took part in the march, includes a shocking description of the event. Its semblance to a pogrom did nothing to quell the rage of Polish hierarchs of the Catholic Church. Ten days later, Archbishop of Kraków Marek Jędraszewski warned his flock about the "rainbow plague," comparing LGBT+ people to Bolsheviks. Two months later, during an Equality March in another major city, Lublin, the police apprehended a couple who intended to attack the marchers with a bomb.

The near-pogrom in Białystok, Jędraszewski's "rainbow plague," "LGBT-free zones" — these features of reality appear regularly in the autobiographies submitted to our contest, serving as markers of an increasingly vocal hatred that would culminate in summer 2020, during a presidential campaign. Our contest was announced on 1 June 2020, and already by 10 June, President Andrzej Duda proclaimed that the fight against "LGBT ideology" would be one of his priorities, expressed in such election promises as the implementation of a "ban on the propagation of LGBT ideology in public spaces." Duda expanded upon his promise during a rally on 13 June, stating: "They pretend that it's people, but it's just ideology." His political allies tried to outdo one another in hateful slogans, turning the presidential election into an unprecedented sort of referendum on the rightful place of LGBT+ people in Poland. On Twitter, prominent member of PiS Joachim Brudziński posted: "Poland is more beautiful without LGBT." This was seconded with equally candid hatefulness by representative Przemysław Czarnek: "We must be done with any discussion about this LGBT filth, homosexuality, bisexuality, equality parades …. We must defend the family against this kind of rot, depravity, absolutely immoral behaviour. We must stand up against LGBT ideology and stop listening to this idiocy about so-called human rights or so-called equality. These people aren't equal to normal people, end of story." On 12 July, Andrzej Duda won re-election, and in autumn 2020, mere days before the end of our contest, Czarnek was rewarded for his public statements with a nomination for Minister of Education and Science, a position he continued to hold until November 2023.

However moved the LGBT+ community in Poland were by the dour electoral spectacle, in which Duda's liberal opponent avoided using the

acronym "LGBT" throughout the campaign and declared himself against adoption by same-sex couples before the second round of voting, the summer of 2020 can be said to be a watershed for an entirely different reason. Against the intentions of the ruling majority, the events of the period showcased the strength of the LGBT+ movement in Poland and led to a major shift — the collapse of taboo and of the previously unbreakable pledge of silence about the existence of non-heteronormativity and non--cis-normativity. Open oppression led to open resistance. Never before was the voice of young queers so loud, nor their refusal of the language imposed by the majority so determined. This is clear in the diaries and in the way that they describe those days. New anarcho-queer collectives, among them "Stop Bzdurom" (Cut the Crap), challenged the homophobia and transphobia of the political milieus. During the campaign, on Corpus Christi — a Catholic holiday — a "rainbow disco" was organised in front of the Presidential Palace, a dancing protest affirming the power of the LGBT+ community. A month later, prominent statues in Warsaw were queered with rainbow flags. The manifesto accompanying the initiative proclaimed: "This is a demonstration of our difference — that rainbow. So long as that flag is called offensive and 'inappropriate', so long we solemnly pledge to provoke." Though the authors of the initiative were subsequently arrested by the police (and ultimately released by court order, the judge presiding having described the actions of the police as a clear act of intimidation), rainbows appeared in many other places across Poland over the next few weeks.

In June 2020, one of the vans giving out homophobic propaganda was damaged in Warsaw. Assenting to the demand of public prosecutors, the court issued a warrant for the arrest of Margot, a non-binary member of "Stop Bzdurom." Because the request was dismissed in the first instance, Margot remained at large until the appellate court reversed the decision, siding with the prosecutors. The events that followed Margot's arrest on 7 August 2020 were of ground-breaking significance for the entire LGBT+ community in Poland. Seen on social media streams, they evoked terror and despair, but also anger. Margot received the news of the decision of the appellate court at the headquarters of Campaign Against Homophobia, a major Polish LGBT+ organisation. Police cars quickly appeared in front of the building, but when Margot went outside, for reasons unknown the officers did not apprehend her. In view of the situation, the activist joined a crowd of protestors who had gathered in solidarity with her, and headed toward Krakowskie Przedmieście Street, a picturesque avenue in the centre of Warsaw where rainbow flags were hung on statues weeks before.

It was only when the marchers arrived there that the police arrested Margot and threw her into an unmarked truck. Meanwhile, policemen brutally assaulted the protestors, some of whom had surrounded the vehicle. Many of them were thrown to the ground and 48 (including an Italian tourist who chanced upon the demonstration by accident) were dragged by force to police cars and taken to jails, where they would remain under lock and key for a period of 20 hours.

In January 2022, at a trial in a case brought by one of the protestors for illegal arrest, a police officer testified: "We were told to arrest every person that wore LGBT colours, regardless of their conduct. We treated that as an order to be followed without question." According to the National Mechanism for the Prevention of Torture by the Commissioner for Human Rights, the procedures applied to those apprehended on that evening at the police stations had the semblance of inhuman treatment. Within this anthology, this moment in the history of the queer community in Poland finds its most apt reflection in the third text. Its author, Marcin, is a psychologist who came to the scene on 7 August 2020 to see if anyone needed his help, and found himself among the 48 abducted by the police (the illegality of his arrest was later recognised by a Polish court).

A clear majority of the 184 texts we received between June and mid-October 2020, mostly written during a period that presaged further aggravation of an already unbearable discrimination, reflects that shift and the political climate of those days — a time of constant debate about what should be done and what might be expected to happen. As the author of the final text of this anthology, Olga Górska, puts it, "I'm 32 years old and have tried to stand by for a very long time. As a model representative of my generation, a millennial, I'm as devoid of illusions as I am of energy. ... But when I watch others fight my battle, when they are arrested (I still can't believe it) for protesting in defence of fundamental human rights, I can no longer remain silent." This "I can no longer remain silent" means "I overcome my own reluctance to expose my privacy and I write. I write this memoir, an achronological story of my own growing up and coming out, about my roots and all the consequences of being a lesbian that I've faced."

That the 2023 parliamentary election ended with a loss for the nationalist right is also due to the resistance of LGBT+ people and the change in public perceptions. However, the texts collected in this volume are more than just a historical record of the resistance and of a time that has already been consigned to the past. Politicians of the victorious liberal-conservative camp are again exhibiting extreme restraint with regard to the promised fulfilment of the demands of the LGBT+ community;

meanwhile, an anti-trans backlash continues in English-speaking countries. No advance of emancipation is secure forever and voices of resistance to the dominance of the "majoritarian" worldview remain necessary and important. They are still a crucial means of tearing down established ideas of a singular norm or firm classification that applies in equal measure to any and every person.

One of our major methodological and ethical doubts concerning our autobiography contest was the inconsistency and incongruity of having to give awards to a select number of the stories, which stood in contrast to our conviction that each of them was as worthy as any other.[16] Luckily, it soon transpired that the vast majority of those who sent us their diaries understood perfectly well the intention behind the contest and addressed their texts not to a "jury" handing out prizes, but to other queer people who would be their eventual readers. This is evidenced by the fact that these texts are clearly acts of solidarity and support, of sharing one's own difficult past with others in the hope that they might not have to suffer the same. In this context, these autobiographies serve as — in terms used by one of the authors at a promotional event for the anthology — "an instruction manual for surviving" meant for those who might need it. Another author, Anna, who was born in the 1990s, puts it like this: "I write this now, I decided to write this because of the campaign of hate against LGBT+ during the presidential elections. Because the announcement for the contest said this text will be recorded somewhere, may be read by someone. And this is crucial because you sometimes need someone to tell you it's gonna get better. Teenage me, afraid of what it meant to be a lesbian, lacking any support, living in a small town, really needed that before I became current me."

Queer culture of resistance in Poland: Internet and language(s)

There is one thing about the texts that we received that seemed particularly poignant, something that goes beyond the queer experience. It is found in stories about childhood, where more significant issues emerge: the insufficiently empowering attitude of adults toward children and adolescents; the expectation that they will submit to the demands of the

16 This inconsistency was deftly and ironically encapsulated by one of the authors, who commented: "First, I wanted to express my sympathy for the group of people who took it upon themselves to decide which stories will be chosen as the most worthy, as winners. I guess it must be diabolically hard to pull off, seeing as it's a bit like putting a value on human lives. And here we are, seeking equality, eh?" (Anonymous, diary no. 116, available in the Manuscripts Department of the Library of the University of Warsaw).

parents, of the school, of the Church, and adapt to their requirements; the absence of a willingness to listen to what these young people want to tell others about themselves. In a heart-rending open letter addressed to president Duda in the wake of the electoral campaign of 2020, Daniel Lis provides a striking portrayal of the soul-crushing solitude experienced by non-heteronormative teenagers in countries such as Poland:

> I had my first suicidal thoughts when I was about thirteen. That was when I realised I wasn't the same as most of my classmates. It would be nice to say I was helped by friends or family, but that wouldn't be true. I didn't even give them the chance. I was too terrified to talk about it to anyone or ask for help. For many years, I kept silent about it in front of my parents. When you're a child, you are scared of many things; you grow out of it eventually. Here, the situation is reversed: the more you grow up, the more scared you are. ... [T]eenagers do not yet have any armour to defend them. They are mortified. They listen intently, looking around in a panic, searching for help and support.[17]

In a situation like this, the space where youths can develop and educate themselves about themselves is no longer found in their nearest surroundings or among their milieu, but in Western mass culture, in some cases consumed covertly. Thus, Daniel Lis continues, "that I was all fine and that there was nothing about me that was different from anyone else, I learned from American films and books."

In other words, support comes not from the next of kin, but from iconic figures on the music scene or in TV series. For instance, lesbian authors attach particular significance to the oft-mentioned series *The L Word* — in the recollection of one author, shared surreptitiously on pirated CDs with "watch this" in black marker on top. As Nina, one of the authors in this anthology, recalls, "This series provided me with some basic insight into the lives of gay people. Every episode gave me this weird, positive hit. I walked taller, more self-assured, and sometimes even felt proud of being different. I went for long walks with my dog and dreamed about living in Los Angeles, among my gay friends."

In absence of other sources of support, the Internet became the go-to place for texts of culture for LGBT+ people in Poland, a major source

17 The letter, originally published on Facebook, has since been reprinted online on a major news portal; see: 'Poruszający list do Andrzeja Dudy. Zróbmy wszystko, by jego treść dotarła do adresata', *Na Temat*, 15 June 2020, https://natemat.pl/311749,list-otwarty-do-andrzeja-dudy-daniel-lis-pisze-ws-ideologii-lgbt.

of information (unavailable either through family or through schools subjected to conservative-Catholic pressure), a space for self-creation, for the presentation of one's truer self, and finally, a tool for establishing social contact. The virtual space is a means to living a real life even for someone who lives in a massive conflict with reality. On the one hand, a world of actual — at least, to a degree — emancipation; on the other, as Weronika, another author, puts it: "a total absence of LGBT people." Olga Górska adds:

> Neither at school nor at home had I heard a single thing about homosexuals. ... I can't believe that just fifteen years ago I didn't know these things, nor did I have any way of checking them out — the Internet arrived in my house when I was in the last year of high school (I remember it exactly, ...the sound of dial-up Internet connection on the phone. I didn't know what a revolutionary role the net played for queer people — suddenly they could find each other, emerging from the underground, from secret signs. I was told about this later by various older queer people).

This accounts for the peculiar attitude of LGBT+ folk in Poland toward the English language — a language that not only enables an immersion in a different world, but also provides basic concepts for self-understanding. English becomes an escape route from Poland — both metaphorically, culturally, and actually. After Poland's accession to the EU, Western member-states became the destination of choice for many LGBT+ emigrants. For a major proportion of queer persons, Poland remains a country that is best left behind. However, leaving does not correspond to a severance of ties to the past and to other people, especially those within the LGBT+ community who are still growing up in the country. As has been mentioned, 16 out of the 184 diaries we received came from outside of Poland. Musings about the prospect of leaving also appear in multiple other diaries by people still in Poland at the time of writing. We endeavoured to include here translations of stories by people who left Poland (such as Anna Nadar "Bun," Tom[asz] Szostek, and Aleksandra Puciłowska) as well as those who considered emigration and others who would not even entertain the possibility, regardless of the circumstances.

The global popularity and expansion of English-language popular culture turned English into the second language of choice for the vast majority of the authors. Paradoxically, some of them find the language to be more native and less foreign than Polish — as well as more capable of expressing

key aspects of identity — in certain contexts. "I felt ever more comfortable using English, which helped me move into the English-speaking part of the Internet. That allowed me to meet a lot of people I could identify with online," writes Linh. Marcin recalls: "For a 12-year-old, I knew English pretty well, which allowed me to shamelessly dive into two kinds of sources — national and foreign. Polish fundamentalism faced off against American vlogs; 'no faggoting' against Ellen DeGeneres; 'zero tolerance' against the 'It gets better' campaign. Being bilingual allowed me to perform a cultural translation of my own nature; I was an expert and a novice rolled into one. Perhaps it was then that I understood how reality is negotiated. For many years, I saw myself more as a 'gay' than a 'gej' [Polish spelling of "gay"]."

Interestingly, the homophobic "no faggoting" brought up by Marcin (and also mentioned by Max Piekart), a slogan that is a mainstay of nationalist rallies, is particular to Poland. In Polish, it is *zakaz pedałowania*, derived from *pedał*, a word that means both a pedal as on a bike and "faggot" (by way of "pederast"). Characteristically, invectives addressed at non-heteronormative people provided the greatest challenge when translating the diaries. Their form and semantic fields do not transfer easily to English. Aside from *pedał*, one example is *babochłop*, a term used to describe a woman with masculine gender traits (such as style of haircut, dress, movement) which conjoins the words *baba* and *chłop*, stereotypical names for a peasant woman and a peasant man.

Like Marcin, another author of a diary included in this anthology also self-identifies using English. Andrzej grew up in a small town in the south of Poland and came out for the first time when he went away to study. He describes it in the following way: "When I was in Kraków I did a coming out for the first time, to my closest friend. I was afraid of this moment, of her reaction. It took me some time to work up the courage to do it, and finally I told her in English — at a party in a club, when it was just the two of us: 'I'm gay'. I couldn't get these words out in Polish." Notably, Tomasz Trzeciak's black-spangled notebook also begins with a phrase in English — "Bitch, I'm iconic," a statement infused with much more self-affirmation than the sentences in Polish that follow on the same page, which highlights the psychological challenge of being LGBT+ in Poland.

As the diaries illustrate, English is also a source of relief and inspiration for those who want to overcome the gender binary. While third-person pronouns, adjectives, and forms of past tenses have masculine and feminine forms in Polish, English helps maintain gender neutrality. "I like English, it's less gendered than Polish," writes the non-binary author of

the first diary, preceded by a quote from Audre Lorde. They include observations on both English and Polish: "'Miss' doesn't annoy me as much as 'pani', just as 'fuck' generally seems less vulgar to people than 'kurwa'. I don't like being called a girl, but I love it when people refer to me as her girlfriend. The joy I experience in those moments is stronger than my dysmorphia. The present tense in Polish allows a kind of an escape from gendered verbs, but gendered forms still catch up with me in adjectives." The capacity to confront one's native language with another is thus also liberating because it highlights deeper linguistic structures at work in the language one speaks every day.

Sometimes, gender neutrality can help a person retain their sense of security: "I said I got engaged with my partner (the word 'partner' is the same in English whether you're talking about a female or a male partner. I deliberately used it to hide the gender of my partner)." Interestingly, the fascination with gender neutrality contrasts with the decades-long struggle over so-called feminatives, feminine forms of nouns, especially those referring to professions. While masculine forms have become standard in Poland over the past century as generic descriptors of many roles and functions, regardless of the gender of the person that performs them, proponents of feminatives seek to increase the linguistic visibility of women by using feminine equivalents of established "common" terms in order to eradicate the masculine bias inscribed in the language. In this anthology, Lucjusz Olszewski's diary tells a story in which this perspective is intriguingly reversed.

A captivating account of the discovery of the neutrality of English is provided by Olga Górska, occasioned by her friend lending her the Polish edition of Jeannette Winterson's *Written on the Body*. She writes:

> I read the introduction from the translator and suddenly a new world opened up to me. The translator wrote that in English it is not necessary to specify the gender of the narrator, and in this book that was exactly the case — the protagonist has no gender, or has all genders at once, resembling Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, whom I also didn't know at the time. In the Polish translation a grammatical gender had to be selected, and the author herself advised the Polish translator that, in that case, it could not be male. The narrator in the Polish translation of *Written on the Body* is therefore a woman.

At the same time, the style of Polish in which the diaries collected here are written is among their most striking features. This is the case even

as Polish suffers from a shortage of words and terms to describe non-heteronormative identities. The very acronym LGBT, as well as terms like queer, coming out, and gender, are imported from English. It is also true that some authors persist with terms that have largely fallen out of favour in English and bring to mind the times of the medicalisation of non-heteronormativity, when it was represented as a dangerous deviation — terms like "homosexualism" or "transsexualism." While there are Polish equivalents of "homosexuality" and "transgender," the more antiquated terms remain far more popular and common than the latter, even to the degree that they are used by LGBT+ people themselves and by their allies. (In this anthology, aside from certain exceptions where such use was justified by the resonance of the given diary, both terms are translated as "homosexuality" or "transgender," so as to avoid creating false dichotomies for the English-speaking reader.)

Of course, the meanings of words like "homosexualism" and "homosexuality" cannot be understood in a vacuum. They should be sought in the context, in the reality in which they are used by the young people who use them. This reality consists primarily of family, school, and the Catholic Church. The anonymous twenty-something author of the diary entitled "Angelism" (also included in this anthology) writes:

> I was introduced to the term "homosexualism" at the age of fourteen in family education classes. I was told that it was a deviation that needed to be treated. A teacher (she taught Polish, by the way, and had no qualifications in sex ed or even psychology) said that homosexuals often catch venereal diseases and HIV, and have a predisposition to paedophilia, and that this was because (for some reason I remembered the term exactly) they "constantly crave fresh little bodies." She also said that she hadn't even known how they had intercourse, but she'd recently read somewhere that they did it anally. And, accompanied by laughter and derision from the whole class, she listed how unhealthy, dangerous and disgusting it was. And I went along with it all — for remember, I was a devout Christian, a conservative with staunch right-wing views — and developed a hatred of the LGBT community.

In a world where this is how the "homosexual lexicon" and associations with non-heteronormativity are presented at school, salvation comes with words drawn from elsewhere, as well as an increasing capacity to build one's own narrative, in spite of the dominant language.

When the difficulty of formulating even the simplest statement — especially in tenses other than the present, comparatively the least gendered tense in Polish — becomes apparent to the speaker as well as to the listeners, this enables a kind of distance and a space for freedom from the dictates of one's native language. Occasionally, the peculiarities of this language can also be "hacked" and reclaimed for one's own purposes. This has been done for a number of years by people who practise and advocate the use of non-binary verb forms — grammatically acceptable and entirely correct, but thus far unused in the first person singular and plural due to the fact that their use was limited to beings theoretically bereft of a voice: gender-neutral entities (a category that in Polish, interestingly enough, includes such entities as "child" or "animal").[18] One way of "hacking" a language is through translation — and not every instance of such form-bending is easily translatable between languages. For instance, of the texts within this anthology, the jocular and charmingly inconsistent language of the transgender Tosia repeatedly shifts between masculine and feminine verb forms in a manner that is difficult to transpose into English, necessitating clarification in footnotes to allow the reader to track the "jumps."

One can see in the diaries a conscious effort to queer the language, transform it, lay claim to it. The language of the authors is fresh and lively, unencumbered by correctness, freed from the internalised rigour of proper and improper writing. The more we looked at these texts, the clearer it became that — as had been the case with the autobiographical narratives of the unemployed, the peasants, and the emigrants collected by IGS in the 1930s — the force and freshness of their language stemmed from its "unruliness": the rejection of the standards imposed by the education system and public institutions designed to impose them. In order to retain the power of these vivid self-expressions, we, as editors, endeavoured to hold back on interference with word order, phrasing, and structure of the texts. We also limited our involvement in correcting punctuation, making note of the degree to which the desire to apply the norm to language has been ingrained in us. We began to realise that the imperative of linguistic correctness, the unwavering belief inculcated

18 The power of fiction to alter reality is best indicated by the fact that the declension of verbs in the first and third person neutral was initially advanced by people such as Jacek Dukaj, Polish science-fiction author, in one of his novels. Afterwards, these so-called dukaisms were reclaimed by those who wanted to see them popularised in everyday life among those who do not want to impose the gender binary on others and themselves. Some of them are involved in a website that takes its name from the Polish word for pronouns: https://zaimki.pl/.

from the beginning of formal education — which many people often give voice to — that there is only one "right" way of speaking, may be related to the equally powerful and equally vocal conviction that there is only one "right" way of loving and desiring, or only one "right" way of being a woman, a girl, a boy, or a man.

The unusual editing approach and the challenge it posed to such editorial practices as proofreading, usually designed to locate and "trim down" that which is "abnormal," enabled the recognition of, on the one hand, the social process of shaping the unitary acceptable language in Poland (along with the involvement of public institutions in maintaining the heteronorm and gender stereotypes), and on the other, the value of the linguistic revolution and revival that could result from the confrontation with the language of queer folk, whose loose way with words stands in contrast to linguistic norms and expectations. By and large, this revolution consists of an uphill struggle for one's convictions and for the (self)consciousness that the language we use, like our given names, is ultimately not the property of any state academy or any state official; they are, instead, our own and should not serve anyone but ourselves and that which we are ready to listen to from the people we live with.

Max Weinreich, co-founder of YIVO, whose autobiography competitions were an inspiration for us, showed great perspicacity in promoting Yiddish as a language that resisted rules and standardisation — more than that, as a language that was often denied the status of a language because of this resistance, being reduced to a dialect or "jargon." At a YIVO conference in 1935, one of Weinreich's associates called Yiddish an "anarchist republic"; in 1945, Weinreich recalled a participant in the lectures he delivered in the US during World War II, a teacher from the Bronx, who offered the best possible definition of the distinction between a dialect and a language in a conversation about Yiddish: "A language is a dialect with an army and navy." Weinreich commented: "From that very time I made sure to remember that I must convey this wonderful formulation of the social plight of Yiddish to a large audience."[19] Almost forty years later, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari provided a philosophical dimension to the distinction in the context of a different example that bound together the question of the divergent status of different languages and the questionable creation of the "minority" by the "majority" — African American English: "Must a distinction then be made between two kinds of languages, 'high' and 'low', major and minor? The first would be defined

19 *YIVO Bleter* 25, no. 1, January–February 1945.

precisely by the power of constants, the second by the power of variation. We do not simply wish to make an opposition between the unity of a major language and the multiplicity of dialects. Rather, each dialect has a zone of transition and variation."[20]

Capturing this kind of revolutionary freshness, a transitory, vivacious language that draws its strength from its resistance to trimming — a strength that registers whether it is written by hand, as had been the case in the YIVO and IGS competitions, or using a keyboard, as is the case today — is obviously a major challenge for a translator. In this volume, one text that is endowed with astounding linguistic individualism is the diary of Łukasz, a trans person. While the translators expended all effort in retaining the linguistic multiplicity that typifies these diaries, the English edition is inevitably more unified and retains only to a degree the wonderfully unkempt style of these texts.

Conclusion: The power of autobiography

One of the organisers of autobiography competitions in the 1930s, Stanisław Stempowski, offered the following assessment of the received submissions:

> Upon reading these diaries, one senses that a kind of folly of frankness and truthfulness befell these masses as soon as they were granted a voice. Occasionally a diary began in toil suddenly awakens slumbering memories of childhood years, forgotten adventures and sensations, as the writing captivates and gradually becomes an everyday need, fulfilled by stealing hours from a hard day's sleep. "When I read the competition announcement," writes one emigrant, "I cried a little, and I think that, though it isn't easy to remember all that's past ... I decided to send in all of my pains and trials since my childhood days ... and started writing that very same day ... not a single word is made up." This diary, born out of emotion and inspired by a passion to tell the whole truth of a person's life, can achieve an extraordinary plasticity, thus also attaining the level of true, if unconscious, art.[21]

The writer Maria Dąbrowska, in turn, reflected on an anthology of peasant diaries in the same period: "Today, through *Pamiętniki* [Diaries], a voice

20 Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 101.

21 Stanisław Stempowski, *On the Memoirs of Emigrants*, typescript of a radio talk presented in July 1938, the Manuscripts Department of the Library of the University of Warsaw, file 1552.

speaks to all who have ears — the voice of the Great Unknown."[22] The same is true of the texts that we received. The power of the stories they tell, the precision and freshness of their language, appear to contradict the scepticism of Pierre Bourdieu about the illusion and inevitable reproduction of social identities, commonalities, and — most of all — structures of power taking place in autobiographical narratives.[23] Instead, these texts subscribe to the more recent contributions to our understanding of social and political life brought by personal narratives which combine life stories with the analysis of social mechanisms in which these lives are implicated, such as Didier Eribon's *Returning to Reims* or Carolin Emcke's *How We Desire* (*Wie wir begehren*). As Anna, the aforementioned author of one of the diaries we received, writes when attempting to understand the sources of the courage with which she took her life choices, "paradoxically, living with people who don't accept you as you are makes you think more about your own desires — your own, not everyone else's."

In a similar fashion, another diarist — Max Piekart — reflects on the impact the writing of the diary and his autobiography has had on him: "Everyone who writes probably goes through that stage when their diaries are not 100% true to what they think or feel. It's natural to fear that unwanted eyes will read our notes and ridicule the style, the thoughts, the spelling. Every narrative is a kind of attempt to take control — to embrace an event and define it. A narrative is a version of reality. And I've grown very fond of deciding my own." We give this book to you in full appreciation of the immeasurable worth of these narratives — stories of one's own.

Łukasz Mikołajewski, Piotr Laskowski

22 Maria Dąbrowska, *Pamiętniki chłopów. Serja druga* (Warsaw: Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego, 1936), XI.

23 Pierre Bourdieu, 'L'illusion biographique', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 62–63 (1986), 69–72; cf. Nathalie Heinich, 'Pour en finir avec l' "illusion biographique"', *L'Homme* 195–196 (2010), 421–430.

Contest Guidance

What we want is an account of your entire life, not just the current moment. Don't put too much effort into making your diary more literary or more elegant; don't abandon the writing if you start doubting your literary talent! What matters is your experiences, your memories of actual events, your involvement in them, what you felt, what you saw. What matters is your story about your life, with its choices, joys, and troubles, written in your own voice, whether it's written in beautiful prose or just written. There's no such thing as an unimportant situation or experience. Everything that matters to you matters; whatever is important to you is important enough. Write openly, frankly, and without fear. Don't concern yourself with how long your text is — what counts is that you use it to talk about the things that you find to be significant and about the things that will help others understand the history of your life.

As you write, you may address the following questions — do mind, though, that this isn't a to-do list, just a list of suggestions, propositions that might make it easier for you to record your own experiences:

- How do you remember your childhood, your family home?
- What were your dreams as a child/teenager? Do you feel you fulfilled them in later life? If not, why?
- How do you remember school? How did being non-hetero affect your life at school (primary, middle, potentially university — did you see differences between those levels)? If you're still in school, share your experiences of it anyway.
- The moment of self-recognition: when did you feel you didn't fit in the heteronorm? How did that make you feel? How did your life change afterwards?
- Coming out, staying in: Are you out? Who do you tell you're non--heteronormative? Who don't you tell about it? What did coming out look like for you? Was it fully your own decision? How did those who learned about it react? Did you try to lead a life that aligned with the heteronorm? Did you enter hetero relationships?

- How did you experience and explore your sexuality and sexual relationships? How did it change for you as you got older? Are there people in your community that you talk to about sex? If so, how?
- Heroes, inspirations, models, and icons that matter for your identity — people around you, but also characters in films, series, books, other media. Music.
- How do you express your identity? Maybe you do it through your style of clothing, your hairdo, your creativity? If not, try to explain why.
- How did your attitude to yourself and others change over the years? Did the political situation influence that?
- Where do you work? How did you choose your line of work? Do you enjoy it? What do you think about your economic situation?
- Your travels, changes of address — leaving your hometown, emigrating from/to Poland. How often do/did you change your address? Why?
- What's your current housing situation? Are you renting an apartment (alone, with someone), have you taken out a home loan? What does your home mean to you? How does your home relate to privacy/intimacy? Do you express your identity by arranging your living space?
- Relations with family, colleagues, friends, neighbours. How does your identity affect them? How does it affect how you choose who to befriend? Are relationships with LGBT+ people different than those with hetero people, and if so, what is the difference? How do you meet new friends, partners? How do you define family? Who is family to you? If you have children, what is your relationship with them like?
- Forms of social life — at home, in the club. Jokes, sayings, anecdotes, own codes and languages, pastes. How do you feel about substances?
- Instances of discrimination, oppression, violence you are experiencing now or have experienced in the past. How did/do you deal with them?
- Instances of mutual aid and support received from friends and communities.
- If you're retired, describe how being retired looks like.
- Do you consider yourself a member of a non-hetero community or society? What does that mean to you? Why do you feel that way? How do places such as clubs matter to you? What is your attitude to LGBT+ organisations? Are you active within them? Do you take part in their activities? Are you interested in them?
- What is your attitude to political life? What are your experiences of the state and public institutions (the police, public services, health services)? Do you take part in political action?

- Are you religious? How do religious institutions (churches) matter to you?
- Are there situations in your life, or decisions you have taken, that you feel particularly proud of? What was/is a source of strength and joy for you?
- What are your dreams now? Do you look to the future with hope, or with anxiety, are you optimistic or pessimistic?

1

[A nonbinary bisexual person, born in 1999
in Białystok. Lives in the Tricity,[1] Poland]

11 October 2020

For those of us who live at the shoreline
standing upon constant edges of decision
crucial and alone
For those of us who cannot indulge
the passing dreams of choice

— Audre Lorde, *A Litany for Survival*

I'm eight years old, it's September, and as I sit on a merry-go-round right in the middle of the playground a classmate swings over the railings, asking: what would you prefer—to *wyjść za mąż* (become husbanded) or to *ożenić się* (enwife yourself)?[2] Something about her question doesn't add up to me, I don't understand it, but I know that from a distance a group of kids from my new class—my parents and I have moved, probably for the sixth time—watches me, impatiently awaiting my answer. I feel like it's a joke I don't get, but as time passes I remain silent. Slowly, I open my mouth and say: *to enwife myself*. Thunderous laughter ensues. I'm the only one not to laugh. The classmate walks away and I'm left alone. The merry-go-round turns slowly. I don't know whether to turn pale with fear or blush with shame.

At home my mother explains the riddle to me: it's men who *enwife themselves*, while women *become husbanded*. I think this is daft. Afterwards, the children in the new class don't want to talk to me—unless they want to have a laugh again. I try to fit in, to dress like them, talk like them; September turns into May, but I still have no one here.

Finally they invite me to meet them on our block. They tell me the place, I dress nicely and go to the spot. No one's there. From my first cell phone I send a text message to one of my classmates: Where are you? She writes

1 Trójmiasto (Tricity), a metropolitan area on the Baltic coast, consisting of Gdańsk, Sopot, and Gdynia (all footnotes are from the editors and translators, unless otherwise stated).

2 *Wyjść za mąż/ożenić się*—in Polish these two phrases, both signifying marrying, are gender-specific, i.e. a girl is expected to *wyjść za mąż*, a boy to *ożenić się*. Polish native speakers occasionally confuse the two in spoken Polish.

back, gives me another address. I go there, again: no one to be seen. Maybe they've managed to get back to the place I've just come from; I circle back there, send more messages even though they're not cheap—another few years must pass before unlimited texting to all mobile networks becomes the norm. Eventually I hear laughter behind an entrance to one of the staircases, I walk in that direction, they shush each other: "Shhh, she's coming over." I face them and smile—it's quite funny, still—but when they see me, they stop laughing. There is an awkward silence. They stare at me and grimace in disgust; they make some excuses and return home. I'm left alone, again. It's another few years before I understand why.

We grow up, the boys become stronger, more violent, they spend breaks smoking cigarettes in the back of our school. They used to be the ones who ran away from me, for laughs, but now, when class ends, it's me who has to run away from them. On my profile on Nasza Klasa,[3] one of them posts: "IF YOU SPEAK TO GIRLS EVER AGAIN WE'LL KILL YOU." Walking home, I see the boy and his older brother waiting on my route. This is the first time I have had to take a detour: an untrodden, snow-covered path on the other side of the apartment blocks, running through a trench-like ravine. I keep my head down so they won't see me if they look in my direction from between the buildings.

Primary school is hell. When I get home I lock myself in my room, throw my backpack on the floor and start to cry. I hide inside a sofa-bed and think that this is what a coffin would be like. To this day my little brother sleeps in the same place where I wondered what death was like when I was his age. It's around that time that I stop wearing colourful clothes, although I don't yet understand why.

During primary school I spend vacations at summer camps. In my memory, all these trips merge into a single never-ending nightmare. Each of them includes other kids from my school who, on seeing me, whisper something into the ears of their brand new friends. I walk into my room at the holiday centre hoping for a fresh beginning; I blame the harassment on a bad start, on being a new kid in a class that's already bonded. At the time, I was still unaware that Poles avoid new things from the moment they're born; we learn it at home, it runs in the family, we drink it in our mothers' milk.

Before I even get to choose a bed for myself they call me a lesbian for the first time. I don't know what a *lesbian* is, but they say the word

3 Nasza Klasa (Our Class)—now-defunct Polish social networking site for alumni and students.

with disgust. They tell me to stay away from them. They ask me jokingly if I jack off, but I'm eight, nine, ten or eleven years old, and I don't know what that means. I keep quiet. I pretend to be sick so I don't have to play with them. I pretend to be sick year after year. I simulate fevers and coughs, I say my throat hurts, I don't let myself be dragged out from under the duvet—I only leave the room for breakfast, lunch and dinner. After a few obligatory meetings, the children start to get in my way when our adult carers are not looking. One time they steal my hat and I chase them, holding back the tears. Another time they try to beat me up—but I already know how to defend myself, I learned it at school. They pull my hair because a rumour begins to circulate that I'm a boy in a wig; they rip it out, and at home my mother can't seem to understand why I walk around with a wounded scalp.

I'm thirteen and start attending middle school, a bilingual one. It's a twenty-minute drive from my neighbourhood and although only two kids from my previous school managed to get admitted I'm afraid that just like during the summer camps soon enough they'll say something to make others hate me before I get to introduce myself. But they say nothing, both having been bullied at one time or another—the girl because of her weight, the boy because of his attitude.

I already know who lesbians and gays are; my aunt drives me home as a right-wing politician on the radio is arguing that neither of them deserves the right to civil partnerships. I tell my aunt that that's stupid; I don't understand why people who love each other can't get married. She remains silent.

In compulsory religious instruction the priest cannot decide which sin is greater, divorce or remarriage (*powtórne zamążpójscie*[4]), as if women sinned more by finding another husband than men do by having a new wife. When he says that he offends my parents, who had married each other in a civil ceremony barely a year or two earlier, the second marriage for both; I leave the room and never go back. I'm one of the first, if not the first child to stop attending this class at our school. That way, I don't hear that I, too, am a sinner and that there's no place for me in heaven. It's okay, I want to tell him but you won't get there either. With the exception of my grandparents, my family becomes more and more distant from the church. Soon, we eat unconsecrated bread and eggs at Easter; all that I miss are

4 *Zamążpójście*—another term for "marriage"; notably, its structure reinforces the notion that it is the woman who "goes for a husband" (*wychodzić za mąż*), though the same word is used regardless of gender.

Christmas chocolates which the priest of the nearby parish handed out, encouraging children to participate in the liturgy.

I grow up. I like boys, and in order to please them, I wear skirts and do my eyes. It feels weird—as if I was putting on a costume and stage make-up. When I talk to my friends about boys, I feel like I'm delivering memorised lines, but at the time I'm under the impression that we all do it, and as a society we accept it in a kind of conspiracy of silence. Long hair begins to make me uncomfortable.

I cut it short, a manly hairdo. My parents are pleased—my hair was damaged anyway. I'm happy, too, until a cloakroom attendant says short hair suits me as it makes me look more girly. I feel angry.

I stop wearing women's clothes. I try to wrap my chest around with bandages, squeeze it with a sports bra, but it remains just as conspicuous as it was. Men's trousers flatten my buttocks, but shirts and blouses don't hide the breasts.

I want to get rid of them. I learn the word "mastectomy." To get one, you have to have breast cancer or be trans. I learn the word "transsexualism." I find a website: Trans-fusion. I learn new terms: HRT, "top" surgery, "bottom" surgery. I learn that it's difficult, almost impossible, but not entirely. Over the following months, years, until today, I wonder whether I was born in the wrong body. My grandmother is diagnosed with breast cancer, and I catch myself moronically wishing that I'd gotten it early. As I run my fingers over my Adam's apple at recess, praying for it to grow some more, a quiet girl with whom I've never talked before sits down next to me and asks in a hushed voice if I'm a boy. I reply: I think I am. She says that that's okay. We never speak again.

I suffer from insomnia since the first year of middle school. Sleeping pills are useless and night after night I fall asleep after three a.m. My alarm wakes me up at six, but I can't get out of bed on time. I'm late every day. Even when I get to class, I'm absent-minded because of how tired I am. At thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen, I drink four or five espressos a day until caffeine, instead of waking me up, just makes me fall asleep quickly. I faint a couple of times, and soon afterwards I end up in hospital—because of my spine, although they keep me there because of poor blood test results.

My relationship with my parents during this period is terrible. I remember that day—opening my eyes and being unable to move. I can only feel the pain between my vertebrae and the rigid tension of all the muscles in my back, which used to hurt every day anyway. I'm scared, I call my mother, but she shouts back that I'm just pretending so I can skip school. It takes a long time before a painful crack somewhere in my thoracic area

finally allows me to move—yet I can barely walk, each step is difficult and I know I won't make it to class. My parents force me to put on a jacket and throw me out the door—with nothing on me but my phone, even though they told me to go to school. Shaking uncontrollably I text a friend who lives a few bus stops ahead. She tells me to come to her place. She makes me scrambled eggs for breakfast and when I finish eating she takes me to the hospital. In the ER, the doctors are surprised that I'm with her instead of my parents; they say I need to come with an adult in order to be admitted. I call my grandmother; hearing her concerned voice I start crying. Instead of my parents it's my grandfather who signs all of the required documents; he arrives straight from his allotment garden, still smelling of wet, dug soil. I get a separate room in the neurology ward, my grandmother buys me pyjamas, underwear, food and a flower in a pot to cheer me up. Because of her experience with cancer, she knows precisely what loneliness in a hospital feels like. In the evening, my mother arrives—her own mother must have yelled at her to make her feel obliged to visit her daughter in hospital. She looks at me from a chair, a fair distance away from my bed, and says nothing. She notices that I have her listed by name in my cell phone contacts, and when she asks why it's not "Mum," I want to burst out laughing.

She has never apologised to me for this, even though I get along with my parents much better ever since I moved out of their house. She's also never apologised for not believing me when my stepfather beat me up. This was not long after I had mentioned to him that I would prefer to be born a boy, although he found another excuse. Then he asked if, apart from that, "everything's okay with me"—whether I didn't prefer girls, too. I denied I did and never spoke to my parents about those things again.

Neither my aunt nor my grandparents have ever questioned that the beating had taken place. To this day, they resent my mother for thinking I was lying. I resent her too. It hurt more than a fist to the face—coming home that day, she found me locked in the bathroom because my stepfather had broken down the door to my room which I tried to lock to defend myself from him; and she still thought I was lying. He didn't put the door back for a week or two. It only took me one day to understand why his daughter from a previous marriage had attempted suicide at the age of twelve; I was six at the time, and we visited her in hospital where she had had her stomach pumped. I remember enjoying the sweets she gave me, herself unable to eat them after the procedure. I was too young to comprehend the magnitude of that event at the time—but now found myself understanding everything that had led her to this point.

Middle school comes to a close, but it's merged with a high school so almost all of us stay in the same building. We join different classes—I manage to get into the IB one.[5] My mother is proud of me, even though she keeps on yelling and insulting me on our way to the entrance exam—with her hands clenched on the steering wheel, jerking the gearbox aggressively, she shouts that I won't get in, that my grades are too low, that I can't even get up on time, that I don't care about anything. I never check the results; apparently I have the highest score, but I don't believe it myself. Since then, Polish and German are the only classes that I don't take in English. My parents say that they have always believed in me and, yet again, I feel like laughing bitterly.

Then I'm seventeen, and I realise I want to kiss my best friend. I met her online, when I was still in primary school; we both wrote short stories, sometimes together, sometimes in a larger group, lately mostly just the two of us, more and more often it's something queer. We get along better than anyone and, although we're diametrical opposites, I feel that we were cut from the same tree, smelted from the same piece of metal, carved from the same rock. This friendship is as obvious as the sun giving light and warmth; it turns into love as organically as morning turns into evening. For the first time, I feel that I love someone. And I continue to feel it every day, as I write these words—for the fourth year running.

I tell my friend about it, the one who'd taken me to hospital, and she replies that she can imagine the two of us becoming a couple. She admits to having a crush on another girl in our English class, I laugh and say that I noticed. It worked out for us, it didn't for them, though they weren't straight either—admittedly, neither was about a third of my class. It's a statistical fact about IB classes with students who want to go abroad—it's been that way ever since our school joined the IBDP programme. No one is surprised that I have a girlfriend, more people come out, we talk openly about LGBT+ in class; we see the right to marry as a human right, in English class we analyse homoerotic motifs in literature, in history we discuss Princess Diana's role in drawing public attention to the AIDS epidemic, we wear rainbow socks and queer T-shirts—although I still don't wear coloured clothing—and a friend tells me about a book she saw at a fair, *GEJEREL*, we rave about the title; I still haven't read it.[6] We talk about *his boyfriend* and *her girlfriend*, it sounds just as casual as *her boyfriend* and

5 IB—International Baccalaureate.

6 Reference to: Krzysztof Tomasik, *Gejerel. Mniejszości seksualne w PRL-u* (Gay People's Republic: Sexual Minorities in Communist Poland; Warsaw 2012); the title is a portmanteau of Gay and PRL (Polska Republika Ludowa, Polish People's Republic).

his girlfriend would. Thanks to my great teachers I finally start to really enjoy school. The economics and theory of knowledge teacher invites us to friend her on Facebook; on her wall, she declares that she'll take in any of her students rejected by their parents because of their orientation or identity. She's great. Together with English and history, economics is my favourite subject. I learn to code.

I do not realise that I live in a bubble, nor that in a few years this bubble will be brutally punctured.

Only two pupils in my class have right-wing views, both of them young men. One of them is interested in nationalism, not only the Polish variation, but he's too smart to be homophobic. The other is a boy who was also bullied in my primary school. He comes from a large party-affiliated family. He was called into the principal's office for wearing a Law and Justice party T-shirt. Nobody likes him, but we show it in a peculiar, cordial way; jokes about our differences can hardly be considered mean.

I begin a long-distance relationship with my friend, then a law student. We either visit each other or meet in another city. I'm not afraid to tell anyone we're together—partly because it's common knowledge in my milieu, and partly because, having survived the bullying phase in primary school, I think I no longer have anything to fear. There's nothing worse I could possibly experience. Only my family doesn't know.

At eighteen, I receive an inheritance from a man I never got to know, although our faces are almost identical. I've taken after my biological father, who is long dead by then. Sometimes I think my mother couldn't bear the sight of me precisely because of our resemblance, because it reminded her of the ugly divorce and the failed marriage. After the wedding, he became an alcoholic; when he drank, he would beat her. A few years after their separation, he was found dead. In the flat, a small part of which I inherited, I find an album of their prom pictures. I skim through it with the impression that I'm looking at my own photographs. The calendar on his desk stopped at 2007, his watch at four o'clock, though it must have still been running a year or two after his death—there was no one to change the battery. Slung over a chair are ironed clothes he must have intended to wear the next day, not knowing he would never live to see it.

I sell my share of the flat; I take only the album. I learn more about my father's life and visit his grave for the first time. On a November evening, my mother and I light candles at his grave. Sometimes I still think about that clock, the hands running indifferently over its face, the incessant tick-tock in the empty room, the sound that finally ceased.

The money literally fell from heaven. I spend a large part of it on a breast reduction operation; I'm lucky because the doctors stop asking questions when they see the degeneration of my spine on the MRI scan. Chronic pain, crooked posture, no one seems interested in the revulsion I feel when I see my reflection in the mirror. For years I have been telling friends that one day I'll get rid of my breasts; they jokingly say they're jealous, claiming that I should've given them away—that they would've accepted the gift, like a transplant. They don't understand that having breasts causes me pain. In every way possible. I'm nearly twenty thousand zlotys away from feeling relief.

The day after the final exam results come in, I have plastic surgery. Mum drives me to Warsaw, where I discuss the final size with my surgeon—I ask for an A, B at the most, he pushes for D, then agrees to C, arguing that the glands will be preserved and I'll be able to feed my children. This makes me want to throw up. I do not want to have children. But the surgeon is sympathetic, perhaps not just because of his fee. He promises to leave me with the smallest bust he can manage; it's still better than if I had opted for the NFZ-funded[7] operation, which makes it impossible to go below a D size.

Before the surgery the staff members at the clinic are supposed to give me sedatives to calm me down, but they don't, as I sit and wait with a smile—apparently some patients want to give up at that point, fearing they could die or never wake up, but in my mind even these options are better than continuing to live in this body; when I lie down calmly on the table, the anaesthetists think it's because of the pills. Waking up from anaesthesia, I see a sight I know from YouTube videos of trans boys after "top" surgery: bandages and drains, patiently collecting blood and lymph. Despite tight bandages, I finally feel I can breathe freely. A nurse gives me morphine. I stay in this private clinic for two days and can't get enough of my almost flat chest. This is one of the best decisions in my life. I'm no longer in pain, I no longer dread looking in the mirror, I no longer protest when someone takes pictures of me. I don't have a single photo from my middle and high school days.

Three months after the surgery, I'm due to start university: economics. I'm first on the admissions list, although I would probably be near the bottom at any of the elite British universities, or at best somewhere in the middle. I stay in Poland—my girlfriend still has two years of law studies and three years of legal training left, and I cannot bear the thought of leaving

7 NFZ (Narodowy Fundusz Zdrowia)—Polish National Health Fund.

her here to study at Oxbridge. When it's time to apply, I can't bring myself to write a personal statement; the teachers are disappointed, they all say I have a chance of getting in. I tell both them and my friends that instead of running away abroad, I will make Poland more like abroad.

I move to the Tricity, and on the same day I inform my roommate that my girlfriend might show up to see me. His answer is strange—and frankly, makes me cringe. For the first time I realise that many people reduce single-sex relationships to sex. I don't argue with him, as otherwise he doesn't make a fuss.

The freshman year passes quietly: when I tell my new friends about my girlfriend, they say we're a sweet couple and wish us the best, and her friends from the law department become my own. We enjoy life. We go on dates, for walks, to the cinema and to restaurants; sometimes I bring her lunch during class breaks, sometimes I stay at her lectures; whenever we're outside, we hold hands and kiss freely. During one of our evening walks along the seaside boulevard, an old lady calls us a pretty couple.

A couple of friends tell me that at least I'm not one of those *rainbow fuck-ups* and suddenly it dawns on me that some people accept me and her, but not *us*. They associate LGBT+ with being obese or underweight, having weird-coloured hair, depression, therapy, leg and armpit hair, shaved eyebrows, ridiculous make-up, being all about sex, not wearing bras—they list the terms, and I have to decide whether I cut myself off from the LGBT+ community or stand up for it. It's because of you that we have to go to psychologists and psychiatrists, I reply. You're the cause of our depression and then you wonder why you have to look at its effects; you tolerate only those of us who bear no visible marks of having suffered from living in this society, you accept homosexuality as a minor blemish on an otherwise essentially heterosexual image.

When more people from my class find out that we're a couple, they don't even flinch; maybe they already knew, maybe they don't really care. I talk with the boys about our girlfriends.

In May we go to our first pride parade together—we have some concerns, but we know we have to be there. Our fears turn out to be unfounded. I never felt safer than at the parade in Gdańsk, among thousands of other people, protected by the police, thanks to whom we could barely read the text on a couple of banners held by a handful of counter-protesters.

When the semester ends, I have to go home for the holidays. I'm from Białystok.

Białystok is organising its first pride parade and I know I have to be there, even though right-wing demonstrators are threatening to block it

from passing through the city. Right up to the last minute I can't decide whether to go—although I spend the previous evening making a banner—but when my aunt tells me she's going, I decide to go as well. On the way, I tell her I have a girlfriend. She'd realised long ago by the way I talked about her.

We begin to hear police sirens and the flutter of helicopter propellers. We pass the first participants who are turning back, an ambulance with the siren going, we see the first tears and blood, we hear the first cries and screams, initially of fear and then the choral, thunderous, aggressive ones. "*GET-THE-FUCK-OUT. GET-THE-FUCK-OUT. GET-THE-FUCK-OUT.*" In Gdańsk, I marched with my girlfriend for the right to marry; in Białystok, I'm marching without her, for the mere right to live.

It seems to me that they outnumber us. The march is surrounded, the police don't want to let us join the parade, and I'm under the impression that any second they'll beat us up right in front of the officers—but finally we squeeze between their shields. The parade moves on, step by step. Rocks, cobblestones, bottles and eggs are being thrown at us. Firecrackers explode under our feet. A deafening bang. My ears are buzzing and when another one lands next to me, I run back, shouting for the others to do the same. "*GET-THE-FUCK-OUT. GET-THE-FUCK-OUT.*" One person has blood dripping down their shirt. Others have saliva running down their faces—we're being spat at. The air is thick with pepper spray; we pass through its clouds as through a fog, firecrackers flashing as if a storm were moving through the city streets.

We march past a church. Women who could have been our grandmothers rattle rosaries in their raised hands, shouting "*WHORES, PERVERTS, FAGGOTS, SODOMITES*!" They swing them around, flogging the air between us like the Romans did when whipping Jesus with a *flagrum*, but instead of stones, the strips of the whip end in dozens of crosses with Jesus' own image. I'm afraid I'll be hit in the head by a cobblestone and die on the spot. Men in nationalist T-shirts are recording us, shouting that they'll find and kill us. The people around me choke on the fumes of pepper spray and, bent in half, take a few more steps forward. We walk, trying to keep our eyes on our feet: you could trip on a stone or a gas can, or cut your feet on the broken beer bottles that have been thrown at us, and a firecracker could explode at any moment. When I look into the eyes of the nationalists and smile to let them know that they cannot take my dignity away, they run their fingers across their throats to show me that if it weren't for the police, my own would end up slit open. Aggression paints their faces and necks a furious red; their veins come out,

their tendons tense like strings of a guitar tuned to play a single, hateful melody. When they yell, it seems to me that both their veins and tendons might burst any second.

Some participants collect the pins from gas cans as souvenirs. People with baskets walk against the flow, handing out badges and handbooks for parents of LGBT+ youth. The handbook is still in my room. I hope that in my absence, my parents have found it and read it; I suspect they have, because their attitude towards me improves considerably during this time.

When I get home, the first accounts of what happened at the parade begin to appear on the Internet. Rumours circulate on Instagram about one person having been killed, then four, then they turn out to be false, although upon my return I myself am ready to believe them: it seems quite possible, even probable, that someone could've been beaten to death. The media begin to send in reports. The right-wing activists say that it was us who threw things at the counter-protesters, the very stuff that cut and burned our skin; they claim that no one was beaten, and when confronted with the footage they begin to analyse it second by second, arguing that it was all an act, that the queers once again are *trying to pretend to be victims of some imaginary aggression*.

I'm angry. I want to scream. My parents regret letting me join the demonstration, afraid something might have happened to me. My photo from the march appears in *Vogue* and one of my primary school friends, the very same who turned my childhood into hell, congratulates me on my courage on Facebook. "Keep it up!:)"—she writes. Seeing her message makes me want to spit on the screen.

I never want to go back to Białystok again. I convince my parents that a mortgage is cheaper than renting. We spend the rest of the holidays looking for a flat in the Tricity, my own permanent place to live. Real estate is expensive, we fail to find anything suitable, and a bank employee either way decides we can't afford it; we don't get the mortgage and the dreaded possibility of having to come back to Białystok rears its head again.

On my first day back in the Tricity, at the SKM train station, an old woman spits on my girlfriend and me. "Dykes," she hisses through her teeth, but walks away. Something that hasn't happened for a year suddenly becomes an everyday occurrence. The air thickens. Soon, Law and Justice wins more than half of the seats in the parliamentary elections. We begin to talk about leaving. We don't want to stay in *this* Poland. The thing that I wanted to escape from in Białystok a month ago has reached this place. It has spread all the way to the borders. To my own surprise I'm happy we didn't manage to buy a flat.

When my new roommate finds out I have a girlfriend, he stops saying "hi." He brings a couple of girls from Tinder to our flat each week and considers this more normal than two girls having a relationship. The pandemic puts an end to it: our landlady orders a ban on visits *due to the coronavirus*, a rule which he breaks the very same day.

I report this incident. I've had enough of him. A month later he no longer lives here.

I have new roommates, and when my girlfriend starts visiting me again after the ban is lifted I keep shushing her in case they too have something against same-sex relationships. She tells me to "fuck 'em" but she's not the one living under the same roof with them. She's not the one who'd have to put up with the toxic atmosphere that could arise had they turned out to be homophobic, even though she has to endure that in her family home. We can't afford our own flat yet—on top of being financially independent, she's forced to support her mother financially, and cover own fees for legal advisor's apprenticeship. I'm supported by my parents. I also work, but I put my earnings, along with a scholarship for good grades, into a savings account.

Saving for our own flat or for a move abroad. We haven't decided yet.

I teach English at a language school—online, because of the pandemic. The girl who hired me was won over by my accent and knowledge, although I lack the working experience of teaching others and frankly, haven't even tutored anyone; at the job interview I lied that I'd been doing it for years. Between lectures and work I often lack the time to eat; between teaching hours I take a succession of throat pills, thyme and coltsfoot; I brew a cup of tea, fix my shirt and start the next lesson, forcing myself to smile.

I'm twenty, then twenty-one, and while teaching almost exclusively people much older than me, I have to lie in order to maintain a sense of authority over my students. I say that I work as a translator and moonlight as a lecturer, that my first major is actually just another degree I took out of a sheer passion for economics. I don't ever mention my age. They all believe these lies. I've been working like this for a year.

I speak perfect English. I'm really fluent, I manage to pass for a native speaker. I've been learning it since I was a child, and my aunt helped me polish it; I then enrolled in a bilingual middle school, later the International Baccalaureate, and then studies in English—in Poland, although my parents had been preparing me to leave the country ever since I was a child. They saw no future for me here, although they knew nothing about my orientation. I still haven't told them because, even though our views are at least similar, I'm afraid they'd stop supporting me, and the

savings I'm putting away for a better future would get stuck at their current level or end up spent on my daily expenses. I'm a full-time student, making barely a thousand a month with the number of hours in the day I have left over to work.

I had good grades in primary school, despite everything. In middle school, I had the lowest average of all the pupils, year by year—the lowest attendance, too. In high school, I either did great or terrible, grades jumping from one extreme to another. I still missed class frequently and never once came on time, even when classes started in the afternoon. Now, I always have the highest score—both for courses and exams. With "Best student!" annotations next to the grades. "Extra points for perfection" in the index. Congratulatory phone calls from the professors. They like me, although I wonder if they'd stop if they knew that I have a girlfriend or that I don't quite feel like a woman myself. I finally haven't missed a single class or a lecture. I was offered a job at the university during my first semester. And again, during the second one. During the third and the fourth I felt watched by all the lecturers who had already heard that I might join their ranks someday. The fifth has just begun.

At the university, I befriend a Russian girl with a similarly ruthless attitude; I'm strict, critical, and hate weakness, myself having never been able to afford it. Our experiences, although so different, have made us equally hard-working and strict; we call it Eastern upbringing. I demand much of others, but even more of myself. I don't let other people's carelessness drag me down; it costs me a lot to swim up to the surface, and I intend to stay there. And swim to shore. My girlfriend's attitude is the same; I fell in love with her because of it, her intelligence, her brilliance, her cynical humour, her stubbornness, and the fact that, although life has made her appear similarly bitter and rough, she is capable of a tenderness and joy, both of which she has taught me as well. The years we spend together are the happiest of my life.

You could say my striving to be better than everyone else borders on obsessive. It's not about earning a place in the heterosexual world. I want to prove to everyone who ever spat on me—or would like to, for that matter—that they must be in a bad place if it's a lesbian who's getting the praise.

I'm not a lesbian. I don't like labels, but when someone asks me I say that I'm bi.

I don't feel like a woman. Nor can I say that I'm a man, although in my heart I feel closer to men than to women. I have very few clothes from the women's section; I look good in them, but after putting them on I feel as if I were dressing a doll rather than myself, or styling some catwalk model.

I treat my body as if it wasn't mine; being born in it, in Białystok, in Poland, was not my choice. But I'm able to live with that now.

I like English, it's less gendered than Polish. "Miss" doesn't annoy me as much as "pani," just as "fuck" generally seems less vulgar to people than "kurwa."[8] I don't like being called a girl, but I love it when people refer to me as *her girlfriend*. The joy I experience in those moments is stronger than my dysmorphia. The present tense in Polish allows a kind of an escape from gendered verbs, but gendered forms still catch up to me in adjectives.

I use this tense to talk about memories, because even though they happened in the past they continue to live on in my mind in some perpetual loop. Although I'm sitting in my bathrobe in my rented room in the Tricity, some parts of me are still in Białystok—ridiculed and spat on. Someone still calls them a lesbian. Someone still threatens them with death. They are still crying hidden inside the sofa and still reading about how to become a boy. Their throat still goes dry because of the pepper spray they've inhaled. Others, the happier ones, are still discovering that the girl they have a crush on loves them too; they are still waking up lighter by the weight of the reduced breasts; they are still buttoning up a men's XS shirt over their nearly flat chest and marvelling at how well it fits them; they are still being praised for answers in an exam; and they are still walking along the Baltic shore holding the hand of someone they love. These memories—the worst and the best—are made anew whenever they are brought up again.

I got my first tattoo yesterday; people ask mindlessly if I know it's forever. I tell them that everything is forever. Memories can't be operated on. Some need to be cared for like scalpel marks on the skin or ink pressed underneath it—in the case of the former, to make them fade, in the case of the latter, to keep them distinct. The scars from my surgery are almost invisible now.

After the parade in Białystok, I was asked on Tumblr whether I considered leaving Poland. I replied that I didn't believe in running away from problems, or in grass being greener on the other side; that we could be beaten anywhere and it would hurt all the same, although in some other country we could perhaps at least count on the attackers facing punishment. I remember my arrogance when I said that if we wanted the rights which LGBT+ people enjoyed in Western countries we had to fight for

8 While the famous English expletive refers to an activity, its Polish equivalent is a derogatory term for a prostitute.

them, just as they had done years or decades earlier. I believed that our education—mine economic, hers legal—would enable us to make a difference here too.

Today, I cannot muster the same confidence. We scratch the subject of leaving Poland like a wound that cannot heal—sometimes it festers, throbs with pain, at other times it is almost sealed. We'll spend the next three years in Poland: she'll become a legal advisor, I'll pursue a PhD in economics.

In the corporation where my girlfriend currently works, I'm known as a fiancé who bakes her cakes and cooks her lunches. Outside of work and university, I spend a lot of time in the kitchen; I enjoy cooking, especially if I can do it for her. I exercise—I joke that I do cardio to run away from the right-wing mob, and strength training to defend myself in case they ever turn out to be faster. Over the past few years we've been writing a book together, although there is not the slightest chance that it would find an audience in Poland. It's written for us rather than for anyone else. For other people—there are texts like this one.

Barely a week ago, I gave an anonymous interview to a German journalist who is researching the lives of LGBT+ people in Poland—part of a series of articles commissioned by a Swiss organisation concerned about our current situation.

She listened to my story and political observations with visible dismay; to me, with the exception of the pride parade in Białystok, they seemed to be nothing out of the ordinary. This shows how different the standards of acceptable behaviour are in our societies. I would like this text, when it is read in a few or even a dozen years, to surprise its audience—for its readers to become just as perplexed by these accounts as the aforementioned journalist was by the stories of our everyday life in Poland. Right now, I'm under no illusion that this will happen. Apparently, almost everyone she had similar conversations with said unanimously: it will only get worse. We suspected this after the parliamentary elections of 2019, and knew it for sure even before the presidential elections this year. Neither I, nor my family, nor my friends, know anyone who voted for Law and Justice.

Yet something makes me hope that I won't have to leave Poland. That in a couple of years, when I'll be teaching at the university, no one will be surprised to hear me mention my wife. That perhaps my own students, driven by a curiosity verging on nosiness, will dig up this interview and this text, written by me when I was their age. That they'll laugh heartily at it, with some respect, and be glad that their lives are better. That we'll

be the generation which would be remembered by history as the one that finally succeeded.

I want to get married. I'm still plagued by insomnia, but I fall asleep faster with my girlfriend around. I'm wearing colours again, not just black. It turns out I like pink, which I used to hate for being too ladylike.

They say that pink does not exist. Our brains invented it in order to process information registered by our eyes with greater ease. I have a feeling that it's the same with gender. I might've read that somewhere before.

The software I use to write this text changes every feminine form into one that's masculine, as if it knew. At each word highlighted in red, I hesitate. Ultimately, it's the feminine one that I use every day.

October 2020

DOMA [Born in 1996 in Gdańsk, cis woman, lesbian, lives in a small town in the province of Pomerania.]

2

My Dear Lesbian Diary!

The time of so-called childhood and youth

I was born on Women's Day (08.03.1996) and that's why I'm a lesbian and a feminist today. My parents met through the Neocatechumenal Way, a radical religious community that belongs to the Catholic Church. The Neocatechumenate likes to boast that it's been approved by the Catholic Pope, so it's not a sect (personally, I have a different opinion on the matter). Within the group they're all brothers and sisters, meeting at least twice a week for liturgy and eucharist, plus participating in various events in between, like preparations for liturgy, meetings at home for prayer, outings and so on. I grew up in this kind of environment, so when I was old enough (13), I entered my own Neocatechumenal community (this time without my parents). You had to complete certain levels of faith in order to advance to the next level. A cool premise, a bit like a game where you have to complete certain goals before you can unlock something. For example, my parents have already unlocked the full package. Their reward: when they die, they get buried in a special white robe. Personally, I find it funny. So, for example, I had to experience a day of silence, not saying a word for a whole day (it's not that difficult, and together with my friends in the community we played charades and had a great time), to be closer to god; I had to talk about my heaviest cross in front of the brothers (I lied to everyone, saying that my complexes were the heaviest cross), to give away all the money I had with me to the community and to forgive others all their debts. Fortunately, I was a poor kid, so I didn't have much to lose. I left the organisation the moment I was supposed to sell my most precious possession and give the money to the poor (I think this stage was called "Our Father", as far as I can remember, but I'm not 100% certain). I didn't make that transaction, but gave up my community life instead. My sister, on the other hand, gave me her mp3 player for 15 zlotys because it was her most valuable item, meaning she did what she was told and was allowed to continue her religious adventure. I still have that mp3 player today; when I was young I used to listen to bands like Nirvana and Tokio Hotel on it. When I asked my parents what they had monetised when it was their turn years ago, they said: a microwave.

For 100 złoty. All in all, I'll probably end up in hell, because you can't share information about the community with the outside world—it's considered a grave sin. But that's OK; it's possible I'd still be condemned for eternity for being a lesbian.

It probably doesn't seem like it, but community life was very absorbing for a young kid. There was something going on all the time, which meant I didn't have time for my school friends because I was always busy with religious stuff. At school I didn't mention that I was in the Neocatechumenate, as I felt that others wouldn't understand, so I kept that dark secret from my friends (the first time I told someone outside the community was in high school, and then I felt a huge weight lifted off my shoulders). And I just felt stupid for refusing to go to the cinema again and again, because I actually had to go to liturgy with the brothers. The liturgies included, for example, a sharing of the word. Everyone could say how they felt about the reading they'd heard, how the words of the Bible applied to their lives. It was quite exciting. People would talk openly about their suffering, all sorts of abominations, how they were sinning, how Satan was hurling them about, how they couldn't stop, yet that they felt that Jesus was speaking to them in this word: "Be brave, come back to me." My favourite part was when one woman would once in a while tell us that she'd strayed from the path of glory again, that she'd been sleeping with a woman again. At the time I found it shocking and extremely interesting.

Back in primary school I googled phrases like "asexualism test" (back then I still used "-isms" to describe sexual orientation, but it was common then[1]), "am I a lesbian?" etc. I was generally afraid that I probably didn't find boys attractive, so I decided that if I wasn't going to be with a boy then I wouldn't be with anyone, and I considered myself asexual. I prayed to god that I wouldn't be like that, because it made me feel awful at the time. And lonely. But I prayed for a lot of different stupid things, like that I would one day marry Bill Kaulitz from Tokio Hotel. I think god doesn't exist because Bill Kaulitz married another girl.

I have four siblings. Well-known fact: people in such a community usually have a lot of children. The more the better, the greater the love for god. And contraception is a sin. So we're kind of lucky that there are only five of us. Our parents didn't think that since they are, for example, poor, this approach to reproduction isn't exactly the best idea in the world. Or that since they both have genetically poor dental health, it

1 "Asexualism," like "homosexualism," is commonly used in Polish, suggesting a medical condition or sexual "deviation," rather than the correct "asexuality" (or "homosexuality").

would be uncool to pass it on to the next generation. Who knows, maybe in the nineties people didn't think about things like that. I inherited poverty and hopeless teeth. Anyway, I often say that since my parents have five children, they should've expected that one of them would be a failure. Unlucky for me, because that failure is me, Doma, hi there. As far as I know, I'm the only non-heteronormative child among my siblings. The community made my sister, for example, walk up to strangers' houses and preach the divine word (it was one of the stages we had to go through). She knocked on one boy's door and told him about Jesus. Today they're married (by "they" I mean my sister and that boy, not Jesus, although you know, Jesus should be present in every marriage), they have a son. My folks are happy, as this is what a real family should look like. Sometimes I feel sad that my parents don't love me, but that's okay. Not everyone has to love their child.

Now for the question of sex education. My parents probably didn't feel any responsibility to make me aware of anything. They probably thought that ignorance would save my virtue and protect me from any sexual violence. Or they didn't think about it at all. I don't know, I'm sorry, in fact I realise that it must have been difficult for them, too, and that they wanted to bring up their kids as well as possible. But the fact is that I didn't hear much from them when it came to matters of the body and so on, but that's okay, because when I was very young (I was in the first year of primary school, I must have been about 7 years old), I found another teacher. My sister and I used to play with dolls who we pretended were successful businesswomen, and their husbands had gone away on a long cruise. My Barbie was looking sadly out of the window and thinking of her beloved, and out of this immense longing she became pregnant. This seemed perfectly normal to me. I had heard so often that babies are created out of love, so I thought immense longing qualified. Then my brother came in, laughed at us, and explained that it works differently. He gave me some information about human anatomy, and I learned about that famous "penis in a vagina" thing, though to be honest I'm not sure how accurate the knowledge given to me by a nine-year-old boy could have been. It was a start, anyway. As for all further information about sexuality, carnality, identity and so on, I had to find it myself, since I couldn't count on my school for education in this field either.

The moment when I truly realised I wasn't straight was towards the end of primary school. I was talking to my best friend at the time (I don't keep in touch with her now, she's still in the community and I cut myself off from my old social world as best I could). We both loved the series

BrzydUla.[2] We were enchanted with Marek Dobrzański, played by Filip Bobek. We hankered after him: oh how wonderful he looks in a suit, oh how I wish he would come out of those bushes (which we were walking past) and kiss me. And when the friend said that she would be happy if Filip Bobek had sex with her, right then, in those bushes, I was honestly surprised. Because at that moment I realised that she really liked him, actually found him attractive. I realised that some girls don't say that a boy is beautiful because it's just a figure of speech, but because they really feel that way. Well, I've been a lesbian ever since, and I blame Filip Bobek for that.

There was a long path toward self-identification ahead of me. I considered myself asexual for a couple of years. Sometimes, in my more gay moments, I would refer to myself as asexual, homoromantic. I have also sometimes claimed to be homosexual, aromantic. And also asexual and aromantic. It varied. It was all mixed up and I saw myself in many different ways. I remember a sleepover with a friend I'd met on the internet. We were showing our tits to some chicks on Omegle (a website where people do various stuff, for example masturbate). And then I told her I was afraid I was asexual. She laughed at me, and said she was sure I wasn't. I was terrified that something was wrong with me. In high school I started to describe myself (but only on my own and in front of my closest friends) as queer. At that time I still wasn't sure about everything. I just knew that I wanted to leave the community, and so I did. Unfortunately, I'm inscribed in the community's book of life, so to this day, when my former brothers start the liturgy by reading out names of the people they're praying for, they are also praying for *** (that's me, to make it clear if it's not clear enough). What a nightmare. I think because of the community having ruined my childhood, I have a rather negative attitude towards any religion. I try not to be prejudiced. I hope no one feels offended by what I'm writing here, and please remember that this is just the ramblings of some ditzy lesbian. And keep in mind all the systemic violence that non-heteronormative people experience from the church and its hierarchy. I met a girl in high school. She looked like Bella from the *Twilight* movies. And I know what I'm talking about, I'm a *Twilight* fan. I once watched a whole marathon of this masterpiece of cinematography. During the interval, I went out for a quick smoke with a friend: chocolate cigarettes, because back then

2 *BrzydUla* is a Polish sitcom based on the Colombian series *Yo soy Betty, la fea* (as well as its American adaptation, *Ugly Betty*), originally broadcast in 2008–2009 and revived in 2020–2022. The main protagonist, a hard-working and intelligent, but very insecure woman of a (superficially) unattractive appearance, works at a renowned fashion house and is secretly in love with her boss, Marek Dobrzański.

flavoured cigarettes (and not just menthols) were still legal, and then I ran back to the cinema hall to stare at the girl vampires.

I also wrote a fanfic based on the Twilight universe. Only in my version, all the werewolves were girls. A hairy lesbian romance. Somewhat tragic, because Jacoba was spurned by Sam, and the rest of the pack had to watch the drama unfold, because werewolves, in animal form, share their thoughts with each other, even when they don't want to. It enabled communal telepathic karaoke (my she-wolves loved Shakira), but was troublesome when someone was going through a heart-wrenching tragedy.

I remember the first time I passed this Bella-like girl in the school hall and heard her voice. She was shouting loudly to her friend: "Shit, shit!" I was impressed. I became friends with her afterwards. She had an activist attitude to life, campaigning for ecology, and animals, and equality. I was impressed by her. I think I was in love. We talked together about how cool it would be if our French and German teachers, two ladies, were a couple. We were both irritated by the boys in our class with right-wing views. She was the one who first told me that I should flee the community and my parents. I remember being heartbroken because it turned out she had a girlfriend and she asked me for advice on what to get her for Christmas. She decided that a hooded blanket would be perfect. I was jealous.

I used to sit with her, the most beautiful girl in the world, at her apartment. Together we prepared some things for an ecological project, we smoked and listened to Ewa Demarczyk.[3] A few years later, in 2020, Ewa Demarczyk passed away. My father played her music in the car, I think as a kind of commemoration of her, when we drove to my grandmother's, and I was very busy thinking about my first serious crush. Being a lesbian is very absorbing. It was through conversations with that girl that I decided to study psychology. Because she was passionate about it. And so it became my passion too. These days we're no longer in touch. She went abroad and is doing great there, apparently she found her soulmate, I'm very happy about that. And I'm doing my master's degree in psychology here, in Poland. I don't know whether I've found my soul mate, but I'm certainly enjoying my studies.

I used to attend religious instruction, and I can honestly say that it was a somewhat traumatic experience. It's quite amusing to listen to a nun ridicule all beliefs except her own, and call them illogical. I even went on

3 Ewa Demarczyk (1941–2020)—Polish performer of "sung poetry," famous for her interpretations of classical poems; incredibly charismatic, she had a powerful stage presence.

a graduation pilgrimage.[4] The girl I had a crush on also went. (A fun fact: my current girlfriend was also there, even though she didn't go to my school, but unfortunately we hadn't met then. Although maybe it's for the best, I'm not sure we would have liked each other then, I don't think we were ready for each other yet). Neither of us received holy communion and we missed a mass together. Since then I don't think I have been to church again, except for some funerals and weddings. After that pilgrimage, one person wrote on his online profile that he sensed god on that trip, that god cured him of stammering. Later, in religious instruction at school, this person was supposed to tell us all about this experience, but unfortunately he started to stammer. It must have been disappointing for him. In other important news, during one religion class a girl shared her insight that homosexual sex was just like fucking a horse. The nun didn't object. That's more or less what I got out of those lessons.

A friend invited me to the prom. I refused. He didn't give up and repeated the invitation again and again. And I just said: "NO!!!" and tried to avoid him. I would deliberately take a later train. My friends urged me to give him a chance, one person even offered to give me some marijuana if I agreed and didn't break his heart. And the persistent friend asked a nun, the one who taught us religion, to intercede for him with god: that maybe this would help him go to the prom with me. Prayers were to no avail. I was adamant and went by myself. I had an average amount of fun at the prom, and the thing that made me happiest was that the girl I had a crush on was dressed in a beautiful suit (and looked stunning) and drank her sherry with me.

The present time, or so-called adulthood

When I went to university, I imagined psychology students as tolerant. I thought that should be pretty much a given. Since you want to help people feel good about themselves and grow as a person, you should understand and accept them. But it turned out that I had to listen to some homophobic remarks at social gatherings with people from the faculty. A girl once said at a party: "Listen, I hope I'm not offending anyone. Is anyone here homosexual?" I didn't say anything, I hadn't come out to everyone then, now I do it automatically. "Because I think homosexuality is a disease." I had a fight with the girl. I occasionally heard some racist slurs too, and

4 After 1989, many pupils in the last year of high school participated in prayer trips organised by their schools, congregating at the foremost place of the cult of Virgin Mary in Poland—Częstochowa's Jasna Góra—prior to the final state exam (*matura*).

I was astonished. I remember a conversation with one colleague. He was very religious and liked to talk about god. And I liked to talk about how I felt hurt by the church (I was often drunk at the time, because it happened at parties, and so I used fairly aggressive and vulgar words, which some people could probably perceive as an attack). He tried to change my attitude towards the church and the world. He said that if I ever felt bad, I could call on his name and his guardian angel would help me. I haven't taken up that offer yet, I've saved it for a rainy day. After my first year of university and the disappointments, I took a year off. And when I returned to school, I told everyone I met I was a lesbian. And no one ever offered me help from their angel again. Now I surround myself with people I want to surround myself with, and I feel better.

I had no support from my family. I mean, I never came out to my parents myself. At some point in my life (around my second year of high school) I left the community. My parents thought that I still believed in god, just that I didn't want to express it in the Neocatechumenal Way but in the regular church. When I turned 18, I stopped going to church altogether and my parents somehow got over it. They were more concerned with my brother, who had some problems. And at that time (it changed later on) I was still rather quiet, shy, and unproblematic, no one expected I'd be "into" lesbianism and other leftist abominations. Shortly after that, I gave up attending communal prayers at our home. And I stopped going to passover, the biggest annual feast, which consisted of performing magical rituals from dusk until about seven in the morning, including baptising babies, i.e. immersing them in a tub full of water. The crowd then chanted: "The horse and his rider he hath thrown into the sea," and everyone rejoiced. Today I celebrate passover night as the moment of my departure from the community. I like to spend this day at home, getting drunk and feeling down. I spent last passover night with my girlfriend. I played her Neocatechumenal songs. And then we had sex.

There were some parliamentary elections going on, I think, and my mother asked me who I was voting for. I replied. And she said: "But that's the left! They're for abortion!" That's when she realised that we were very different. I stopped eating meat. Now I haven't eaten carcasses for five years and I'm extremely happy about it. When I was young, I loved the *Braceface* cartoon. Now I'm as cool as Sharon Spitz because I stick to a vegetarian diet like her. And the boys? I hardly mention them! When there was a big controversy over the debate on the anti-abortion law, I took part in all the black protests in my neighbourhood (and there were quite a few). I remember, during some family argument, my mother saying that

I was funny because I had nothing against abortion, but I wouldn't kill a spider and needed to carry it out to the balcony in a cup. At the time it made me laugh, now it saddens me that we live in different worlds even though we live in the same house. I started to dress in an unconventional way. I dyed my hair in non-normative colours, painted pictures on my mug, and wore flashy clothes. I hung rainbows around my room, talked about my queer friends and visits to gay clubs. I took part in equality marches (in the Tricity area,[5] but I also travelled to Warsaw for this event once). But I never confessed to my mother: "I am a lesbian." On the other hand, she once invited me for a talk. She said that a friend of mine (my girlfriend, my future wife, a woman with whom I am in a relationship) could not stay the night with us. After all, when my sister had a fiancé (not a husband), he wasn't allowed to sleep here either. And besides, she doesn't want me to do any activities here that she wouldn't approve of, because there are rules in this house. And if I could just not be so obvious in the neighbourhood, because my youngest sister often gets into fights with her peers anyway; so if I could just not cause her any more problems, because her friends would make fun of her. It broke my heart a little. I've never discussed this with my father. All I know is that he gossips with the rest of the family about me and spouts such nonsense as: "I knew about her for a long time. And when she got the tattoo, I was already sure." But it's quite funny, because I'm convinced that my father hasn't figured anything out over the years, after all he doesn't talk to me and doesn't even remember how old I am. One aunt, for example, remarked that she felt sorry for my mother, because her son was such an idiot (I won't explain why she thought so, it doesn't matter here), and Doma was a homo. I was told this by my cousin, who I happen to get on well with. I was furious and didn't want to spend christmas eve dinner with my family. I told my mother that if she invited my girlfriend, I might consider spending the holiday they consider important with them. She didn't say another word about the matter. She told the rest of the family that I was spending christmas with a friend.

I met my girlfriend (my sweetest dearest love) through the Tinder dating app. In my profile description it said: "My sun sign is Pisces, so I don't recommend ms" (of course it's about the zodiac sign, let me explain: fishes are the worst, besides I have Mars in Pisces and that's what I blame all my failures in life on; if anyone's interested in my whole natal chart, I'm more than happy to send it to whoever). When I write on the Internet, but also talk to people in so-called real life, I often use "ms" for

5 Tricity—see n. 1 on p. 1.

"myself" (*siebie, się, sobie*), just to make things clear. My current girlfriend texted me the other day: "you certainly aren't a fish out of water," followed by some water emojis. And I replied, not really, because I can only swim breaststroke and with my head out of the water, because immersing myself entirely scares me a bit. Also doggy paddle, but swimming that way's tiring. She later told me that she was surprised that I'd replied to such a shitty pick-up text. And by a long text. Well, I'm glad she liked this fair description of my swimming skills. On our first date we went for coffee and an art exhibition, and drank with her friends afterwards. It was quite funny, because they asked how long we'd known each other and how long we'd been a couple, and it was just our first date. On the second one she showed me around her town. An interesting thing happened when we were visiting the Calvary[6]: suddenly a crowd of people started walking towards us, mumbling something. We were being loud and laughed, and only realised after a while that it wasn't just some random crowd of people, but that their mumbling was a prayer. We'd stumbled upon the ceremony of stations of the cross. We quickly fled. I felt great, as if I was running from zombies during the apocalypse.

One day I was visiting a friend, helping her bring the groceries home. While we were in the lift, my girlfriend, who was not my girlfriend at the time, called me. I cheerfully recited to her the entire shopping list, everything that the friend I was helping with the shopping had bought.

— I hate people in love—my friend declared with open disgust, after I'd finished the telephone conversation—When are you going to see your girlfriend now?"

— She's not my girlfriend—I objected.

That same evening I went to visit her. Just before falling asleep she said she needed to talk to me. I covered my head with a pillow because I was scared and didn't know what I wanted to hear. "Doma, I'm fucking in love with you, for fuck's sake." After that, we started to officially go out. She confessed her love for me (not some kind of "love for fuck's sake," but a real one) about six months later, after which she nervously recited a quote from *Shrek*. I replied that I loved her. We've now been together for a year and a half and are planning our future together. I think there's a good chance that she is the love of my life (unfortunately the stars think otherwise, because her sun sign is Libra so our compatibility isn't the highest, which sometimes makes me genuinely sad).

6 A calvary (*kalwaria*) is an outdoors setting with stations of the cross—often rendered in decorative form—intended for prayer and contemplation.

I'm currently 24 years old. I'm studying psychology. I'm doing an MA about feminine forms, how they are perceived, and how using feminatives changes our perception of reality (if at all). I dream of graduating and having everyone call me "magistra."[7] I'm interested in drag queen culture, I'm especially passionate about gals dressed as gals. I hope to start doing it myself soon. So far, I've shaved my eyebrows and I'm drawing little x signs in their place, this is probably the beginning of my drag career. I'm a feminist, I'm an LGBT activist, I attend all the events in the area for non-heteronormative people and issues that I consider important. For example, one of the female professors at my university took part in a happening, seen as notorious by some, at the equality march in Gdańsk in 2019. This performance consisted of certain people wearing rainbow halos on their heads, and there were also people walking in the march carrying a stick with a painting of a vagina that resembled religious symbols. As a result, certain gentlemen organised a protest against this professor for spreading left-wing ideologies at our university. I took part in the counter-protest, because I believe that symbolism isn't just reserved for Catholicism, and that the rainbow is not offensive.[8] Furthermore, the Catholic religion is also the religion of LGBT+ people, and I don't see how anyone could feel offended by that. Well, unless you're prejudiced against non-heteronormative people and see their existence as something unbecoming. Besides, I don't think you should punish victims of systemic persecution in retaliation for a peaceful provocation (because there was nothing violent about it). Anyway, I was there and voiced my opinion out loud. Once (in autumn 2019), Nalaskowski, a professor famous for his homophobic remarks, including comparing gay people to rapists, was giving a lecture in Gdańsk. My girlfriend and I went, as it was an open-access event. We wanted to protest if he used any offensive words. But some men blocked our way at the door. They said that sure, it was an open lecture, but for people with conservative views. They suggested that they'd let us in if we said a few Hail Marys and wore an anti-abortion pin they had with them. On top of that, they told us that we didn't look like people of good

7 *Magistra*—feminine of *magister*; a female holder of a master's degree. For more on gender in Polish language and the debate over the adoption of feminine forms (*feminatywy*) of universally masculine terms, see the Introduction, p. XXIII.

8 *Tęcza nie obraża*—a slogan that often appears on marches organised by LGBT+ organisations and on their social channels, formulated in response to accusations by state agencies that the use of the rainbow as an LGBT+ symbol in conjunction with religious symbolism was blasphemous and therefore illegal. The Polish criminal code mandates legal sanctions for an "offence against religious sentiments," which the Polish authorities and right-wing media personalities tend to exploit (for more, see the Introduction, p. XIII).

will and that we'd better not look in the mirror, because the sight would scare us. And they pulled a stunt with policemen who were guarding the event. I mean, right in front of us they shook hands with them, as a kind of greeting, but I'm sure it was a show of force. I also take part in the usual demonstrations, for example, in support of sex education. When there was a high-profile case related to the Black Lives Matter movement, I also took part in an event as a gesture of solidarity. Currently (August 2020) there have been a lot of protests in connection with Margot.[9] I was there, too. I even went to Starogard Gdański for the first pro-LGBT event held in the city, called *Solidarny Starogard* (on 13th August 2020).[10] The city is known for its nationalist groups, so I felt I had to support local equality initiatives in their infancy, together with people from the LGBT+ association where I volunteer. The counter-protest was powerful. And violent. In Gdańsk, people who want to express their opposition to pro-equality events are usually a rather small group of guys in shirts and ties, trying to adopt an intellectual tone to cover up their hateful statements. But they're not terrifying, in the sense that I don't fear for my physical safety around them. Yet in Starogard Gdański, the backlash was unbelievable. Full of guys screaming that "a boy, a girl, that's a normal family."[11] The police really had to hold them back and separate them with a police wall so that they didn't come at us. As I was returning from the event, a man from the counter-protest attacked my group and started grabbing an LGBT flag from one person. Someone pepper-sprayed the aggressor in the eyes. It was the first time I had ever seen the spray used in person.

I yell for my rights loudly. That is, when I'm away from home, because here I'm forbidden to talk about those things. Once at dinner my father mentioned something about two women raising a child together. My mother shushed him: such topics should not be discussed at the family table. I felt awful, as if *I* were such a subject. Please, don't misunderstand me, my partner and I are not raising children. I still live with my parents. I'm poor, my partner is poor (maybe that's what makes us such a good

9 Margot is a trans activist, member of the Stop Bzdurom (Cut the Crap) collective, who was arrested on 7 August 2020 (as a "precautionary measure") for her involvement in a confrontation with a "homophobus"—a van coated in anti-LGBT+ propaganda—in the centre of Warsaw in late June 2020. The arrest sparked protests that were met with violence from the police and indiscriminate arrests of the participants; the actions of the police had since been denounced as inhumane treatment by both NGOs and state watchdog institutions. For more, see the Introduction, p. XIV—XVIII.

10 *Solidarny Starogard*—Starogard in Solidarity.

11 *Chłopak, dziewczyna, normalna rodzina*—a slogan used by right-wing, nationalist, and Catholic circles during counterprotests against Pride Parades in Poland.

couple), but we have a life plan and if all goes well, we should be leaving our homophobic family homes soon (that is, flats; we're both girls from the projects). Oh, right: her mother doesn't approve of our relationship either. She says she respects me as a person but, for example, she is disgusted that I use the loo and towels at her place. Currently, I don't visit my girlfriend when her mother is at home. Our new tactic is me dropping by when her mum works a night shift. Then I sleep there and at 6am I go back to my place. It's very tiring, I wish I could spend time with my girlfriend normally. But I guess you can't have everything. You can have nothing, for example.

But let's talk about me some more. About the current me, a colourful, loud lesbian. I collect *Monster High* dolls. I love them, so if anyone would like to get rid of their old dolls, please note that I will accept absolutely any Monster doll. I created a lesbian asylum for them in my room. Oh, because every single one of my monsters is a lesbian. Also, I'm really interested in psychology, so I think I'll do great in my specialisation (I'm majoring in intercultural and gender psychology). I want to get married to my girl. Here, in Poland. Invite everyone to the event, say it's a wedding, big fat wedding, get married, have a symbolic ceremony (instead of a priest there'll be a massive, beautiful drag queen) and then have a queer party. Neither of us have proposed yet, but my girlfriend and I are already creating a plan for what our ceremony will be like. We've compiled a guest list (last time we had to cross out one person we had a terrible falling out with). We've written down who's going to cook/bake for us (because it's going to be a whip-round party as much as possible, after all, I must remind you we're poor, oh and everything will be vegan). I want my family to be irritated by the fact that, how can it be, how can I do things like that. Let them be ashamed of me and disinherit me, and say they don't want to know me. Sometimes I wish I could finally get through to them, that they could see how I'm afraid to live here, how upset I am that even my own mother doesn't want to have a conversation with me *about* me, that she doesn't really love me. Because it's not like I carry pepper spray everywhere with me just for fun (I got it as a Christmas present from my beloved) and that I'm all freaked out as soon as a strange man speaks to me on any subject. Recently some guy accidentally nudged me on the train and apologised. I was terrified. I think that because so many other guys have threatened me with violence (one even suggested corrective rape, another said some disgusting stuff and touched my knees without my consent, someone growled at me: "LGBT WHORE!" and yet another shouted that I was making a swamp monster of myself, because how could

I have hair like that), so yes, I'm a bit scared of men in general. But I try to be menacing, to walk with purpose. I brag about my beautiful, clean, fragrant armpit hair everywhere and argue with some men that I'm not gross at all, and if they want to, go ahead: shave your legs, armpits and assholes yourselves. When I sit across from guys on a train I spread my legs wide to indicate dominance. I don't know, I feel a bit silly for having to do things like that.

Time for a funny interlude, an anecdote. Remember how I said I'd inherited poor dental health from my parents? Well, a few weeks ago I went to see a dentist (I'm writing this on 27th August 2020, I just remembered that you're supposed to put dates in your diary, I guess). I walked into the office, and asked, perhaps somewhat foolishly: "Heh, I guess I should take the mask off my face by now?" to which I heard a cold response: "And how else am I supposed to treat your teeth?" I'm a fairly sensitive individual (in fact I can be a total cry-baby, I'm not proud of it, I blame it on my Sun and Mars in Pisces), so I immediately got stressed, felt foolish, and sat down in the chair. I began to explain the problem.

"Something's in my mouth. Some kind of abscess, I think?"

"An abscess? Why use a medical term? You should learn what it means first," the woman replied.

"Oh, okay," I tried to speak calmly and matter-of-factly, but I was already jittery and it might not have come out the way I'd hoped. "I've got this thing in my mouth."

"A thing in your mouth?" Her tone was obviously mocking.

"A thing with pus, in my mouth. I think."

"Maybe just show it to me, because I don't understand you. 'A thing in your mouth'..."

I opened my mouth, received anaesthesia. The dentist started to fix my tooth. And while I was sitting in the chair, already a bit nervous, she suddenly looked at me and asked:

"Maybe you're in the wrong clinic?"

"Excuse me?," I asked when I didn't have either tools or her hands in my mouth.

"Maybe you went to the dentist instead of the beauty salon for depilation?" She glanced at my legs spread on the chair and added: "Never in my entire career has a client come to me with unshaven legs. Are you anti-shaving?"

"Well, I don't shave my legs," I said, too stunned to respond assertively to such unprofessional questions.

"And your armpits? You don't shave your armpits either?"

"I don't." I fell into her trap. I should've said nothing, laughed her off, reacted in any other way. I knew it perfectly well even then, but instead I acquiesced to being treated rudely. That's an alternative right there.

"You'll be a sensation on the beach!," she said playfully.

Strangely enough, I wasn't laughing at all. I cried a little, but I pretended it was because of the drilling. And you know, it was painless, after all I paid around 30 zlotys extra for anaesthesia. When it was all over, the dentist informed me: "An hour without food and drink. But that won't be a problem for you, because you don't seem to eat at all." I left the office quickly and began to cry. I called my girlfriend so she could get angry about the whole situation, instead of me, and call the dentist names. I can always count on her; when I just want to cry at some injustice, she gets sanctimoniously indignant on my behalf, cursing and calling out anyone who's behaved unkindly towards me. I felt a little better.

I don't think I have a serious problem with food at the moment. It used to be worse, I think. I blame patriarchy and capitalism. Back in primary school I was on some stupid diet, doing 180 sit-ups before bedtime. I used to religiously follow blogs like pro-ana. I stopped sweetening my drinks, I gave up spreading butter on bread. For years I alternated between diets, and when I wasn't dieting I would overeat to the point where I couldn't move. I never went to see a specialist about it. I'm not sure if my parents realised I had a problem. I've been eating rather normally for a few years, I don't obsessively count calories, I don't exercise after every meal, I still don't put sugar in my coffee and tea, but that's probably a good thing. I don't eat a lot of butter, but that's because I'm trying to cut down on animal products, I'm hoping to go completely vegan soon. But even so, sometimes I step onto the scales and rejoice if I'm the leanest I've ever been. Or I feel depressed when, for example, I weigh a kilo more than usual. I know I need to stop, especially since I'm skinny, so I have no reason to wish to lose weight. And even if I wasn't skinny, there's nothing wrong with being bigger, but the picture in my head isn't like that at all. Rationally I'm aware of a lot of things, but I think there are deep preconceptions sitting in me about how my own body should look. So even though I'm all about body positivity movements, I support and love them with all my heart, internally I still have unresolved issues that maybe I should address. And I'm annoyed by my mother's never-ending comments that I'm so skinny, that Tatra Marina (the cat we took in from the street recently) is emaciated like me. I think that's why that last comment from the dentist hurt me so much.

I'd like to point out that it's not like only sad things happen to me. I have a big mouth and huge teeth (they're really nice, it's a pity that

their condition is so hopeless: a fact I hope everyone knows by now) and I usually walk through life with a smile (a big grin that takes up more or less my whole face). My girlfriend, as she recalled our first date, said that her impression afterwards was: oh my, Doma has an enormous mug. Well, let's get back on topic. I just feel worse now because the problems have been building up. The vilification by the LGBT-phobic media, the physical attacks on people in my community, the coronavirus. But on the whole, I have a pretty decent life. I make videos of my dolls. Like the ones where I say I should be Man of the Year as a reward for giving the rejected Monster High dolls a home and shelter from harassment. Sometimes I draw some nonsense and get annoyed because every time it turns out that I can't draw. I go to club parties and dance until dawn (oh, how disgusting that sounds, please forgive me, I really wanted to use that phrase). Once, when I was spending the night at a club, I met someone there. I was quite drunk and annoyed, so I talked about how Jesus had ruined my life. I began to reminisce about the community. It turned out that this person had also been on the Neocatechumenal path in their youth and their feelings about this organisation were similar to mine. I felt a rush of euphoric elation. Together we did a special community dance (because the Neocatechumenate has its own dance, which consists of one step repeated over and over again, and the brothers perform it after each more solemn eucharist) to some club song. I have no idea what was playing at the time. Hope it was "Toxic" by Britney Spears.

I'd also like to mention (in connection with nice things that happen to me in life) that I have three cats, which are a source of great joy. The first one was Misiówka Florentyna. My cousin once said that someone she knew wanted to give away a female kitten from a cattery: she was born with a visual impairment and could hardly see. My sisters and I persuaded my parents that we had to take her in, that it was the right thing to do. After all, it's a well-known truth that one has to care for the infirm. I'm not sure why they agreed, as for years they'd been against any pets larger than a rabbit. We named her Misiówka Florentyna. This name has a very long tradition that I'll explain right away. When my mother was pregnant for the third time (I already existed in this cruel world, I'm their second child, their first daughter, the most unsuccessful one), she asked my brother (who was three then) what he would like to name his little sister, soon to be born. He replied "Misiówka!"[12] I don't know why our parents didn't accept that brilliant suggestion and name their child differently.

12 *Misiówka*—lit. female teddy bear.

In any case, years later our cat received this proud family name. As for Florentyna—I don't really know. Our mother said that she gave her offspring only one name each, so let the cats suffer for it and have two. Later on, we adopted Filomena Mirabelle (from a foundation of some sort, she looks like a vagabond, but my mother tells everyone that little Filomena Mirabelle has such noble features) and Tatra Marina (it amuses me that a cat is called after a brand of beer, but our mother thinks it sounds nice, stretching from the mountains to the sea). The third one came to us (she was found wandering around outside) in a terrible overall condition. Skin and bones. Worm-infested (there were slimy worms in her faeces that looked like noodles that came alive). Plus, as it turned out later, she was pregnant. We had to take her for an abortion-sterilisation procedure. My mother said that she'd have to confess because of it.

I dream of making enough money to be able to move out of my childhood home. I want to have my own therapy practice and to live somewhere, I don't know, where I'd be respected or something. My girlfriend and I are planning to leave this country in about three years. We made a list of places we're considering. We're not very original, we think about the Netherlands the most. I wish everyone would miss me. But I'm afraid they may be relieved. Currently, I hope that due to the coronavirus and the fact that my university offers only remote classes, students from further away will no longer live in Gdańsk, so maybe the prices of flats/rooms will fall. But I don't know much about it; it would just be nice. Because I'm fed up with living with my parents who pretend that non-heteronormativity doesn't exist.

In general, I believe that if a person is already reproducing, they should assume there's a possibility that their child may be, for example, LGBT. But my parents didn't consider such a possibility, oddly enough, because I'm sure there were lesbians in the 90s. Well, but you could probably remain unaware of it. And now they feel stupid in front of their neighbours because their daughter dresses so brashly. My mother told me that I should consider her feelings. And that she doesn't want the neighbours to talk behind our backs about what I look like. I know I probably sound like a rebellious teenager which I'm not (remember, I'm 24), but I have a lot of pent up grief.

By the way, now I'm living in the time of a pandemic. I cry a lot. I think I'm getting a bit burnt out because I keep taking part in LGBT demonstrations (in Poland at the moment there's a campaign against non-heteronormative people; members of the government call my community an ideology; trucks pasted with pro-paedophile information drive through

cities and preach homophobic nonsense from a loudspeaker; an activist got two months in custody for destroying one of these trucks and getting into a scuffle with the driver, she's awaiting trial; attacks on LGBT people are on the rise; the police are sometimes rather unreliable and, well, that's the situation in general, I swear I know a lot about it, but I'm so tired that this brief version will have to suffice).[13] I argue on the Internet with people who say that maybe I should stop being provocative and that my situation isn't that bad. Oh right, and after all it's the LGBT who offend Catholics all the time. So I have to explain that this is bullshit, plain bullshit, so stop this bullshit, and in response I get insults and ridicule. I cry a lot and think about how I hate this situation. When I found out that they were arresting Margot (an activist from the Stop Bullshit collective, the one who got a precautionary two-month detention), I was on a train, travelling to see my girlfriend (she lives in the neighbouring town, eight minutes away by train) to have my hair coloured (after probably over a year in pink I decided to change to green, I was excited), watching a stream of what was happening in Warsaw (I live in a small town near the Tricity) and crying. Thankfully, my mask was almost completely covering my mug, so maybe fellow passengers didn't realise I was such a cry-baby. I'll be spending the next college semester at home due to the coronavirus. And I'm glad because I won't have to go to university every day (my commute takes an hour and a half), but on the other hand I'm afraid I won't be able to function here, as I hate being together with my family so much. Not that long ago, when I could leave the apartment safely and not be afraid that someone was going to breathe coronavirus in my mouth, I tried to come back here just to sleep. And generally I would go to some pubs with the girls, sing karaoke at parties (my girlfriend and I perfected the song "All the Things She Said," we were phenomenal, breathtaking, real stars on the stage), and now I don't have as many opportunities to get out of the house. Sometimes I wonder if my family also wants to avoid me as much as I want to avoid them. I don't know.

In general, I sometimes feel like my whole life at the moment is a performance. Because as soon as I leave the house, with my quite unique look (for aesthetic reasons, I feel better about myself when I'm looking so beautiful, and besides, I think I quite like to shock with my image, and I wouldn't want anyone to think I might be straight, for example), a simple train ride becomes a statement. I repeatedly hear unwanted comments. The fact that I don't shave my legs is already a provocation to some, and

13 For more on the current situation of LGBT+ people in Poland, see the Introduction.

my armpit hair is scandalous. When I published a photo showing me as a hairy woman, I received hundreds (and I don't exaggerate) of very unpleasant messages from men. For example: yuck, I must smell like a herring, or: no man will ever look at me now (I was pleased, I hope I'm not attractive to any guy). When I walk through town holding hands with my girlfriend, we're often approached. Recently some guy yelled at us: "lesbianki" ("lesbianki" is my absolutely favourite term).[14] While I was cuddling with my boo in a meadow, a boy came up to us and suggested that we should kiss while he watched. Of course, we are lesbians for the pleasure of men. I hate that.

A day in the life: 28th August 2020

I went to Gdańsk to meet a friend I hadn't seen for over six months.

I sat on the train alone, my girlfriend was supposed to be there too but she missed the train. She said she would join us later. As I was travelling on this beautiful means of transport, I read that at some conference of the Polish Catholic episcopate an official document had been issued calling for conversion therapies. All veiled in pseudo-intellectual wording, of course. I burst into tears. Have I mentioned that I'm a cry-baby?

I listened to my friend's story about how arguments flare up in her house because of different approaches to raising dogs. Me and my gal (who'd joined us) returned the favour by talking about how arguments flare up in our homes because our mothers have a different approach than us to raising cats. Besides, we made this friend of mine watch *Trailer Park Boys* (dear readers, do yourselves a favour and familiarise yourselves with this culture text as well). We smoked two cigarettes each (almost mint, because my girlfriend and I buy scented inserts that you put between the rows of cigs, so they get a very faint mint smell).

As we were returning to my girlfriend's flat (her mother had a night shift), I read that Margot had been released. She was supposed to have been in detention for two months. She spent three weeks in jail and then the court ruled that the detention was unfounded. I was happy, but not even very euphoric. I had no energy left.

We had a vegan broth. I don't know how it started, but our conversation turned to funerals.

14 The common term for a lesbian in Polish is *lesbijka*; "lesbianka" seems to be a borrowing from Russian (*лесбиянка, lesbyanka*), but is not commonly perceived as such and happens to include the suffix *-anka* typically associated with (often endearing) feminine forms of nouns, including place names (e.g. *Krakowianka*, a woman from Kraków) or names of ethnic or social groups (*Słowianka*, a Slavic woman).

"You still have it easy, because if I die, Mati will definitely tell you about it. And you can come to my funeral."

Mati is my beloved's brother. I'm on good terms with him. I like the guy very much: he's sweet, kind, loving.

"Well yeah, your mother would probably be thrilled that I got in. She'd probably think I was ruining the celebration."

"So what, I don't give a shit. You'd come and throw yourself dramatically over the coffin. I'm sure you'd have Mati's support. You two could still hang out after I'm dead."

"Yes?" I laughed. "What for? To remember you, and just talk about the times when you were still alive? Of course, that wouldn't be at all traumatic for me or Mati. No, I don't think I'd see Mati again. We'd probably like each other on Facebook and that would be it."

"I'd have it worse, because nobody from your family would tell me about the funeral. And if I wrote to your sisters, they probably wouldn't want to disclose the information either. I'd probably have to find out where and when the funeral was going to take place from some flyer posted on the entrance to your staircase."

"Jesus, they'd probably give me a Neocatechumenal ceremony." I shuddered at the mere thought. I know that funerals are primarily to ease the pain of the mourners, but I still wouldn't want my corpse to take part in an event like that.

"I'd come in there and make a scene and fuck the whole place up. I'd be screaming: 'How could you put her in a bra?! Doma didn't wear bras!', I'd throw a rainbow flag into the coffin, spit in the grave and shout: 'You killed her! She's dead because of you!'"

"I'd probably have normal makeup and icky ordinary clothes. Hey, if I die, tell my mother that I keep a wedding dress in my wardrobe, so they can put me in it. Because I didn't tell my mother that I'd bought the dress, I couldn't be bothered to explain."

"It's a waste of a dress to throw it in the ground. When you die, I'll take it. It's a waste of 50 zloty."

Just to clarify, I found the outfit in a junk shop. It fits me perfectly. A beautiful, stunning, vintage dress. I can't wait to wear it for my lesbian wedding photo shoot.

A day in the life: 29th August 2020

An acquaintance told me that they once attended the funeral of their trans friend, who the priest misgendered even after death. In the sermon he said some bullshit about how even lost sheep eventually find their way to

Christ. It made me feel foolish that I got so worked up yesterday thinking that they'd put regular make-up on me and probably dress me in some uninteresting ordinary outfit in my coffin, when these days a lot of people are probably dressed posthumously in clothes that made them feel dysphoric when they were alive, and their identity isn't respected even after death. What a sickening world.

I went to visit my girlfriend because her mother had a night shift at work again. I was picked up from the train station (which was sweet). We were walking, holding hands and chatting, probably wondering if a certain skin lesion near my beloved's mouth was herpes or not (I was betting it wasn't, but alas, we typed the symptoms into a web browser, which ruled: it's herpes). We headed for the pharmacy to buy some ointment for the wretched thing, just in case. We passed a group of young people. Highschoolers at first glance. I'm sure they were younger than us, not young kids though. Typical teenagers. Anyway, one boy from the group yelled in our direction: "Screw LGBT!" Just like that. And here comes the lovely part: me and my girlfriend had the same exact reaction, at the same instant we both showed them our middle fingers and yelled back: "Fuck off!" I'll be honest, it freaks me out that lately we've been encountering such cries more often than before.

Why does anyone think it's a good idea to see a human being and yell "screw you!" at them? I find certain mechanisms quite hard to understand. I hope to be a good psychologist nevertheless, after all I don't need to know everything.

We set our relationship status as visible on Facebook. Maybe we were waiting for some kind of argument from my girlfriend's family (because they like to make mean comments about LGBT-related things to her), but nothing happened. No one insulted us under that post. Oh, where are the Internet flame wars when one needs to get a little agitated and experience some thrills?

Closing argument

Thank you for reading my story. I hope that these notes will prove to be helpful to someone and that they have some historical/sociological value. I don't know, maybe someone will identify with me, for example, or think: "Gosh, it was the same with me," so they'll feel that they're not alone, and that would also be great. I'm hoping to find out that there are many lesbians who discovered their identity thanks to Filip Bobek. And seriously, please remember that I'm just a single lesbian. I'm not responsible for the entire multi-voiced LGBT community. I also have social privileges on certain

issues (for example, by virtue of the fact that I'm white, cisgender, neurotypical, my body fits into the normative standard, and so on), so I may not look at certain things from the widest perspective. So please take my words with a pinch of criticism, and I'll thank you sincerely.

I'm glad I wrote this little diary. I used to write down the history of my life really meticulously. I kept diaries from my first year of primary school to my first year of secondary school, and I filled up a lot of notebooks. But sadly I lost them all because during one emotional crisis I burned them to a crisp and danced around their ashes, quite a dramatic gesture. Joking. I threw them in the rubbish bin on my housing estate. Anyway, I think the fact that I've written all this is a kind of achievement. And it's nice, because I don't have many of those in life. Probably the most important thing is that thanks to me my girlfriend liked the cartoon *Teen Titans Go!*, and let me remind you that it's an icky series, so that's a serious thing. And I'm doing well in my studies, I think I'm pretty smart. I hope my thesis supervisor shares this opinion. And besides, I've ordered a Kondrakar heart for my girlfriend (it's a magic necklace from the *W.I.T.C.H.* cartoon, my beloved is a fan), a portrait of her cat Filemon, and some lovely knickers decorated with a brocade pussy. I'm going to give it all to her for her birthday and I'm hoping that the gal will be genuinely happy. Last year I bought her two *Monster High* dolls (and it's not that easy, because these dolls are no longer produced, you have to look for used ones in good condition) and I made a cardboard cot for them. When I was working (I was selling souvenirs, for example some shells with a "Sopot" sticker on them, great business), and there weren't many customers (because the season was coming to an end), I had my co-worker sew little pillows for dolls together with me. We had a sewing race. I had a great time. I then gave my sweetheart this lovingly sewn bedding, well the whole gift in general. I must admit I'm hopeless at sewing, but this co-worker did great! Oh, and to make things clear for everyone, my girlfriend was born on the same day as Lech Wałęsa (but you know, not the same year). And I was born on Women's Day, which is why I am now a lesbian and a feminist.

Epilogue: 1st October 2020

Generally, if you ask me how my life is going, I'll answer right away. I've found a job. This summer I admit that I was rather sad and didn't do much, that is, I didn't earn any money. As I'm quite cash-poor, so this lifestyle has been quite destructive to my finances (living on savings, as it turned out, unfortunately makes savings melt away, shock). I had to find a job, especially since I'm so sick of living with my parents. I don't particularly

like the rules in this homophobic house. Sometimes I fantasise about suing them for alimony and having a steady income because of the very fact that I exist. I wouldn't do it because I bet they wouldn't forgive me, but dreaming is free. The worst part is that I have no idea if or when I will ever be able to afford my own place. I'm currently cleaning in a diet catering company. I mean, that's what I do for a living, I'm a cleaning person. It's pretty cool because at least, by having a staff lunch there, I eat better than I ever have before. There are always vegetarian options available, and sometimes they're even vegan only. These are my favourite days because the rest of the staff laments, omg how are they going to eat this, while I have a massive selection and can choose between veggie skewers or rice noodles with sauce. It's cool, I like it. Well, and apart from the grub, I earn more than the minimum wage, which is great. My standards have been met. It's a shame that they have to be so low in this dreadful capitalist world, but well, I can't do anything about it right now.

My girlfriend loved the gift. She said she couldn't have dreamed of a better one. I'm glad that, thanks to the heart of Kandrakar, she is now the guardian of the portals and keeps this Earth safe.

And on a final note, let me share the nicest thing that happened to me yesterday. I was coming back from work, exhausted. I looked at my phone and saw the following text message:

"Government Emergency ALERT

Caution! Today (30.09) a very strong cleaning gal is returning from work. Find her a safe place to stay. Watch over her because she is the greatest and most loved woman in the world."

3

MARCIN [Born in 1995 in a small town in the south-west of Poland, homosexual cis man, now lives in Warsaw.]

I live in the attic of a small tenement house in a villa district in Warsaw. From the fifth floor you can't even see the street, so I sometimes imagine I'm in Paris, in the Middle Ages, or that I'm the sole survivor of an apocalypse. In each of those scenarios, I am just as uninformed about current events as I am now. During the lockdown in spring 2020, prompted by the coronavirus pandemic, my only window into the world was sound: I constantly heard the ominous hum of small planes and helicopters passing above my rooftop windows. The paranoia that began to sprout back then in the corners of my room made me believe that the media were lying and everyone had already died. During my summer "lockdown" in jail, we looked out of the basement window of our cell, trying to figure out the time of day based on the angle at which the August sun fell on cars and buildings (we failed).[1] Today, in the last day of self-isolation after coming in contact with an infected person, both memories seem to me to speak to something naked and defenceless. The attic and the basement are fused together as a singular psychic retreat. I've been living alone for almost a year now; it appears that solitude is a borderline experience for me. In solitude, I integrate just as much as I regress—in my cell, I can be a monk who discovers ever newer mysteries of faith as much as a convict devoured by the maw of the absurd. As the world succumbed to the pandemic, I became engulfed in the fumes of my own self. For two months, the dark of my roof windows was only lighted by the occasional flicker of a lighter, which led inexorably to an addiction and a psychological crisis—my fourth. Number one began following my return from a three-month work trip to the British Isles; four years ago, I lived there completely alone, in a mouldy room dusty with dreams. I warded off number two, two years ago, by going alone on a four--day trip to a Central European capital. Number three, a story from this year, was a consequence of my arrogant belief that I could make it on my own. And number four never happened because in August—after many years—I decided I couldn't make it on my own. Today, this mystery of

1 The author was among the 48 detainees arrested by the police on 7 August 2020, as part of a raid on a demonstration against the arrest of Margot, a non-binary LGBT+ activist, and several incidental onlookers. For more, see the Introduction, p. XVII—XVIII.

faith finds expression in the thirty square metres of average standard living space. The "meet & greet" with the Lord My God is payable in cash before the 10th of every month. This attic defines me—in it, I do as I please. Autumn is coming, and when it is dark again, I start writing. I was born in the south-west of the country, in a tower block. I come from a family of teachers, though it should be said that Mother never liked the profession, Father wasn't cut out for it, and Grandpa always brought the Pope to mind. And since my father followed my coming out by accusing my then-deceased grandfather of "poking young boys" (?), I was even led to believe that I had learned to read and write from a paedophile-priest. In fact, Grandpa was simply a charismatic divorced man who threw out gender norms. He raised five grandkids and cooked them dinner, a bit like Robin Williams in *Mrs. Doubtfire*. Accusing him of sexually abusing teenagers (the only way of reading homosexuality available to him) must have been Father's clumsy attempt to separate the wheat from the chaff. He would rather my manliness came from him—the gay genes could only have come from my mother's side. I may actually share quite a few similarities with Grandpa: I inherited his love for animals, elegant sense of humour, and Ukrainian looks. He gave me my aforementioned knowledge of words, unconditional love, and a rich spiritual life (Grandpa taught me and my sister our prayers). Actually, my first dream job was to be a priest, although I recently learned from my aunt that I made that up—according to her, I wanted to be a philosopher or a dustman. And here I am, a psychologist.

In a way, I learned psychology from my mother—a victim of her own nervous system and an unhappy marriage, the Tsarina of passive aggression, fan of gritted teeth and migraine. Mother introduced me to the world of the paranormal: as a professional translator, she spoke many tongues—literally and metaphorically. Once in a while, she would suffer a bout and begin a séance. Her scream communicated her powerlessness, for she was merely "an idiot nutcase who raised two snakes at her own bosom." On such occasions, words flew around everywhere, and I—a young medium—grabbed them like a drowning man grabs a straw, analysing facial expressions and the tone of her voice. At times, prophecies emanated from Mother's weary temples. "I will slam the fucking door and never come back," she confided to the young snakes. Many years later, my sister told me she felt like smashing her own head against the wall out of helplessness at the time. I "slammed the fucking door" aged 15, which completed my initiation into the world of the paranormal. The year before, Mother treated our guests to the sight of her head hitting a mug.

In spite of these traumatic memories, I see Mother as a good, loving parent. She taught me to be true, to treat people with goodness, and follow my intuition. She did so unconsciously, but that's how things work in psychology. She loved then—and loves still, for we have already passed the test of time and completed our therapies (one apiece for me and my sister, two for Mother). Mine allowed me to no longer see her as an unstable tyrant and begin to recognise her efforts and forgive her failures. Including her marriage to my father.

It is said that victory has many fathers, but mine always wanted exclusive rights. He wanted admiration and understanding in total disregard of facts or circumstances. I remember my therapeutic intuition awakening during phone conversations with him. While in middle school, I tried to understand and reflect back my father's internal paradoxes. After 10 years, an MA degree, and early experiences with postgraduate studies, I realise that the words I had been desperately seeking at the time were "gaslighting," "splitting," and "narcissistic personality disorder." Since Father's hands were always clean and his intentions pure, the entire world around him had to be filled with a repulsive, stinking darkness. The epicentre of evil was my mother; I, in turn, never ceased being a thoughtless pawn to him. My personality belonged to the wife that he hated; my orientation—to her father, a dangerous and detested rival. My eyes, hungry for closeness, belonged to Father, but that's not how he ever saw it.

Looking back, I think my father never wanted to hurt me. Quite the contrary—he wanted to give me only what he thought best within his narrow understanding of closeness. He wanted to make a man out of me so as to protect me from the reality that had damaged him so badly. His own father told him: "A real man stays calm even when his seat is burning." Besides this, Grandfather drank and threw punches and axes at his own children. Father must have had pretty good reflexes given that he managed to duck. He did not keep an axe in his own house—as a newly-minted bourgeois, he needed to sever his ties to the country. Thus, when time came for him to murder my mother, the only thing he used was his own hands pressed tightly on her throat. Blood told—my reflexes also turned out to be good, and Mother survived. Father remained calm and claimed in court that he had "only caught her by the bathrobe." After the trial, he went back to work, teaching children at a high school.

Before the marathon run of psychological and physical violence began, my father showed me his better side. At times, he could take on the guise of an eccentric philosopher, a connoisseur of the arts, or perhaps a fount of knowledge narcissistically guarding its secrets. He passed through

life misunderstood. Awkward in social relations, he always preferred to demean others, which earned him their fear, misread as respect. I don't recall him having any regular colleagues. He spent his afternoons alone, locked behind the living room doors. He would gulp down two beers and fall asleep in front of a National Geographic film, occasionally a porno. Mother slept alone in their bedroom. After the attempted strangling, we slept together out of fear. In the night, I would listen for Father's footsteps and dream of vengeance.

In our four-storey home, the foundations have been trembling for ages. Our little pinscher trembled, and so did I. Then, in the middle of the night—an avalanche. Everything falls apart and all labels are mixed up. Mother is a whore, Father is a boor—that's all I catch along the way. Like a shepherd dog, I draw Father away from Mother, initiating a rescue operation. In anger, I learn by rote the verse "Round and round goes Mr. Fox," intending to say it to Father in my head.[2] As I sing to him in the anteroom that he will go to jail if he goes on hurting his own family, he slaps me in the face with an open hand so hard that I fall to the floor. When I confide to Mother that I have searched the term "toxic jealousy"—which she had mentioned the day before—on the Internet, she reciprocates by revealing that she felt so powerless that she wanted to drive her car under a lorry. Our new friendship is sealed by my childish fantasies, in which we lay dead on a bed of flowers like unfortunate lovers. I know these aren't my thoughts, but whose emotions are they? Mother takes me and my sister away from home a few months after she moves out herself. Her prophecy about "slamming the fucking door" is fulfilled after 18 years. Father remains alone in a home buried under an avalanche. During a phone conversation, I panic and plead with him not to kill himself.

And thus, among the rubble of the life I had known, blossoms the first shoot of a child's sexuality. I can't recall precisely when, but I suspect it was roughly half a year before (or maybe after?) the conflict between my parents erupted. I was 12, about to finish primary school. Dressed in a white, elegant shirt, I played my first animated erotic games, at that point still heterosexual. Initially, I did it out of childish curiosity, then increasingly

2 *Chodzi lisek koło drogi* (Round and round goes Mr. Fox)—a verse associated with a children's game where children sit in a circle, palms stretched on the floor behind their backs, while the "Fox" (another child) walks around, waiting until the end of the verse to put a ball (or another chosen object) in someone's hand. If the Fox manages to escape the child with the ball and take its place in the circle, the child then becomes the Fox. The verse has multiple varieties, the most common of which begin with the lines "Round and round goes Mr. Fox/His arms and legs have been chopped off" (*Chodzi lisek koło drogi/Nie ma ręki ani nogi*).

under youthful compulsion. I recall the first dry orgasms and the gradual addiction to the blissful feeling of nirvana. To this day, good sex can give me a headache—my delicate nervous system doesn't deal well with overstimulation. It took me a few months of contemplation to figure out whether I'm attracted to the actress, the actor, or the interaction between them in porno movies. Sometimes, I covered half the screen and wondered what was exciting about the face of a woman desiring a man. Do I want her or *be* her? And what if I covered the other half? Do I desire a desiring man?

After many a happy ending, I came to a conclusion: I'm fucked. It's men. At one point, something clicked and my wearied psyche, my hormone--addled brain, and my penis met in the same room. I remember being obsessed with one porno—perhaps that was the defining moment? Two men visit their PE teacher in his apartment and present their muscles to him at his request. Their white boxer shorts, which the coach has them undress down to, contrast sharply with sun-tanned, muscular bodies. Then, the teacher removes their underwear and the oral sex scene begins. These twenty-five minutes defined my idea of closeness between men for a long time. From the outset, I identified with the passive PE teacher—I wanted to be dominated at all cost, adored by the two other Greek gods, fully lit, oiled, and erect. They could only exist in my fantasy, since smalltown realities gave little grounds for such optimism. I was a rather timid, effeminate middle-schooler, which some boys found irksome. Occasionally, I was laughed at, pestered. One boy from another class in my year seems to have sensed my otherness, as he took to resolving his anger issues on me for a while. When once I dared an ironic reply to his verbal assaults, he picked up a massive stick and hit me on the head with it. Terrified and humiliated, I was marked out for the whole school as the victim. In order to deal with my emotions, I began to sexualise aggression and fear in contacts with other men. The angrier I was at my colleagues, the more I secretly coveted them; at the same time, I feared closeness because it could betray me. Uninterested in stereotypically "boyish" subjects, I traced my path somewhere on the outskirts of the school microcosm, pining for the more handsome teens. From my seat in the back of class, I searched for glimpses of clavicles, hairy calves, the first stubble on a jaw—occasionally, the outline of a penis inside a locker room. Once in a while, I heard myself or one of my colleagues being called a "faggot." I didn't quite understand what it meant, but it always gave me a shudder. Gradually, I became accustomed to the thought that the world hated me. I spent a long time on the Internet, reading about myself—initially the Catholic rubbish about how I'd go to hell and so on. I remember several months of something

akin to depression, a battle against myself. Wringing my hands, covering my face after every orgasm. I regretted my sins the same way every Catholic does—with exultation, but without the will to change. During the night, I did my research—more pornos and bits of identity. My heart shakes with laughter at the memory of the young boy I was back then, secretly devouring the "Homosexuality" subpage on Wikipedia. By that time, both Mother and Father worked overtime, so they crammed lots of extracurricular activities into my schedule. For a 12-year-old, I knew English pretty well, which allowed me to shamelessly dive into two kinds of sources—national and foreign. Polish fundamentalism faced off against American vlogs; "no faggoting"[3] against Ellen DeGeneres; "zero tolerance"[4] against the "It gets better" campaign. Being bilingual allowed me to perform a cultural translation of my own nature; I was an expert and a novice rolled into one. Perhaps it was then that I understood how reality is negotiated. For many years, I saw myself more as a "gay" than a "gej." For a young boy, this was like finding yourself in a hall of mirrors. I had signed my pact with the devil: my soul for the prettiest reflection. And then, my soul trembling like a leaf, I just waited.

In the meantime, bits and pieces of memories, emotions, and preconscious thoughts began to fill in the vacant new real estate inside my head. I was always troubled that I might be 男同志, whatever being 男同志 meant. The first experience I can retrospectively associate with homosexuality was one of shame. As a pre-schooler, I already instinctively felt I should be ashamed of the fact that my list of wishes to Santa included stereotypical girl's toys. I always wanted to play with dolls and watched *Sailor Moon* religiously. I remember a situation inside a store, with my father trying to make me choose a red warrior figurine and my mother—a pink Power Ranger. The memory symbolises to me the different approaches of my parents to my attitude and self-expression. Mother took it in her stride (in spite of a certain anxiety she admitted to after my coming out), Father tried to change it. Mother teasingly called me "Maryla" (something

3 *Zakaz pedałowania* (lit. no pedalling)—a long-established homophobic slogan reproduced on stickers and banners that exploits the two meanings of the word *pedał*—a derogatory term for "homosexual" (derived from *pederasta*) and a bicycle pedal. For more, see the Introduction, p. XXII.

4 *Zero tolerancji*—the watchword of a programme devised and implemented in 2006–2007 by Roman Giertych, then Minister of Education and Deputy Prime Minister. The official full name was "Zero tolerance for violence at school" (Zero tolerancji dla przemocy w szkole), but both its contents—consisting of the enforcement of stricter discipline on the pupils and greater state control over the schools—and Giertych's own nationalism and homophobia led proponents and detractors alike to identify it as a tool for oppressing minorities.

of a female equivalent of my given name), Father contrasted the "hero" he would like to see me as to the "wimp" I usually turned out to be. During a family outing to a nearby castle, he took a photo of me holding a historical sword in one hand and in the other—a massive shield. I remember the photo was his idea more than mine—I would have preferred one with a pink gymnastic ribbon I had become obsessed with (the result of watching "girly" anime on German satellite TV). I maintain the same loose approach to gender to this day—I take devoted care of my skin and use a concealer under my eyes and a women's deodorant (to me, the men's ones stink). While in high school, I found the uproar about the "gender monster" to be ridiculous—even before I understood the term, I already personified it. "Gender is everywhere, just imagine a heterosexual couple: a female police officer and a male painter," I wryly explained to my therapist when she began to suggest to me during therapy that I was an unconscious bisexual. Perhaps my biography, particularly the theme of the emotional triangle with my parents and the fact of having a younger sister, may have given her some basis for questioning the "authenticity" of my orientation; to me, however, homosexuality was a natural, if not easily accepted, extension of my nature. I doubt a happier family history would have seriously affected my attitude towards women. Their breasts, buttocks, and thighs draw as much admiration from me as sculptures in a museum. Male torsos and underbellies is what my eyes feast on inside my bedroom.

A few years ago, I chanced upon the notion of "childhood gender nonconformity," the most prominent and earliest observable predictor of homo- and bisexuality according to studies. The strange-sounding term allowed me to finally breathe a sigh of relief and understand why the tiny, internally scarred "Marcin" had for so long shared the stage equally with "Maryla"—a bit like two fragrances that I can exchange on a whim, different in obvious ways, but emanating from the very same skin. Suddenly, I could make sense of the ball gowns made out of bedsheets, the wig made out of a towel, and the few weeks in high school when I was completely petrified due to my inability to decide if I wanted to *be* Ariana Grande or *be like* her. Though I see myself as a cis-gendered person, the capacity and malleability of my sexual identity (including its natural relationship with my sexual orientation) remains a mystery to me, at least as far as the conscious mind goes. It's on this bestial, pre-verbal plain that I understand and feel. That'll do for now.

The aforementioned memory involving Ariana Grande illustrates quite well the chaos that consumed my mind throughout the three turbulently productive years of high school. I had good grades in middle school,

so I submitted my papers to one of the best schools in the country, a regional "talent factory." To attend the elite high school I had to move to the regional capital, where I would live in a dormitory—a turn of events that I found to be as exciting as it was dangerous. Driven by a desire to escape the troubles at home, I unknowingly placed myself inside another pathological system, the stress induced by arguments and fights between my parents exchanged for lack of sleep and regular stomach ache: no real change there, then. The senior year still haunts my dreams today (a tell-tale sign that I don't do well with pressure). What made the unreasonable standards and the loss of youth bearable to me was the fact of belonging to an elite institution, the opportunity to train my social skills in the dorm, and the few hours every day that I could use to explore my own identity. The range of extracurricular activities was overwhelming: I could choose between self-mutilation, smoking *cannabis indica*, early sexual contacts, jogging, study of philosophy, first coming-outs to friends, binging on cheap beer by the river banks, as well as a solitary spontaneous out-of-body experience while suffering from the flu, which awakened in me certain spiritual (or rather escapist) needs. My sexual needs were finally roused by marijuana—my first and most tragic love. I remember becoming so intoxicated with its fumes during the winter break of my senior year that I felt a classmate I hated (someone I had heard was "an insider"[5]) to be a truly attractive young boy. Naturally muscular, his face sadly brought to mind "a mixture of Schwarzenegger and a lady" (as I triumphantly proclaimed to my friends over a cigarette). In spite of that, the desire to lose my virginity prevailed, and so—basking in the haze of youthful ignorance—I negotiated a reality in which the said J. became my boyfriend. Flirting in the dorm was a thrillingly emotional affair; it took place by way of understatements, knowing looks, and ambivalent texts on Messenger. After a few months of courtship, the first intercourse took place. And then another. And another. And another. And another. The joy lasted for a few months; and actually, this hollow, compulsive adventure led me to move to the state capital to pursue my studies. In the meantime, we realised regular ejaculations weren't enough to glue together a relationship—each of us went his own way, and I gave my broken heart to Warsaw.

Indeed, it was in the heart of the country—dirty, ugly, and concrete as it was—that I finally discovered myself. Studying psychology allowed me to begin to confront the thick layer of unconscious beliefs that had been

5 The word the author uses here—*branża* (lit. branch of industry)—is a common euphemism for being a member of the LGBT+ community.

weighing me down like a wet jumper. At university, the interest in philosophy and psychology that had awakened in high school transformed into a powerful motivator for aid work. Between lectures, I formed first friendships and talked feverishly about my plans of becoming a therapist—a dream shared by almost every parentified child. After graduation, and then after the first year, I travelled to the British Isles for a few months, where I found work as a waiter. The second trip, in particular, had detrimental effects on my mental health; seeking to repair my damaged self-esteem after my return, I found myself a Foreigner with a penis as long as the list of excuses he used to avoid starting a relationship with me. We spent evenings smoking marijuana, bantering, and having passionate sex. He was a stranger to me, both culturally and emotionally, so, to repair my damaged self-esteem, I finally began therapy. After three months of regular sessions, I ended the relationship with the Foreigner and gave my broken heart to the therapist.

During my second year at university, I became involved in a Warsaw NGO working for the benefit of the LGBT+ community. At the time, I was too young to recognise the value of my contribution to the emancipation of the community of non-heteronormative people in this country—I just wanted to feel useful and gain skills for working with people in the future. I still remember how apprehensive we were when the Law and Justice party gained power; my mentor said: "There will be no more free elections." I shrugged and opened Grindr for the twentieth time that day. In business hours, I discovered new facts about myself on the psychoanalyst's couch, and at night I put them to the test in the company of random men. My love for marijuana and for casual sex drew on the same mechanism: if closeness creates danger, danger would give me closeness. My well-ingrained habit of sexualising aggression allowed me to create a repository of memory involving about thirty sexual partners and countless psychotic episodes after weed (mostly "negotiable," some spiritual, and two requiring medication). My therapist denied me the right to both pleasures; I didn't even mention the occasional ingestion of mephedrone.

The first metaphor I shared with my therapist during consultation was that I felt like I was stuck inside a cage that slowly closed above me. "I have five years to do something about it—after that, I'll be done with my studies and turned an adult, and it will be too late," I told her, terrified. The metaphor aptly describes the progress of my acceptance of my own orientation in the context of increasing hostility toward minorities in the country. Warsaw will forever remain my golden cage—it is the place I had held in the back of my mind as my final destination ever since my

first coming-outs (Mother—accepts; Sister—accepts; Father—I broke off all contact). When I was accosted in front of a gay club in the very centre of the city ("Watch where you're going, faggot!"/"*Excusez-moi*?"/"Uuugh... Fuck?"), I lost my footing for a few days.

But when I first went to the Equality Parade in Warsaw, I was certain this was my corner of the earth. I set my feet upon it proudly and firmly, surrounded by unconditional love. Somewhere on the horizon, a Promised Land loomed, but I had always returned, new escape plans plotted only in anger. This is where I transformed from an effeminate youngster into a self-assured young man. I gained experience in work, relationships, and in bed. I found love—perhaps the love of my life—and with it, an answer to the question what it means to just be good enough. As far as possible for me, I was happy.

And then I was arrested. I still haven't got round to making a detailed description of my "summer lockdown," so I'll just copy-paste an account of the events of August that I had published on social media a full week after this whole sick, illegal intrusion:

"How I unleashed World War II"[6]*—that's how my sister summed up the arrest of myself and 47 other people during the police roundup on Friday as we watched media reports of the latest events on the TV on Saturday evening. As much as I understand the point of the joke and find it to be quite funny, having considered it, I have to say I disagree with the analogy it is based on. First, the word "war" suggests a kind of symmetry (which the esteemed police officers at the station tried to force upon me)—a balance of forces that I just can't see in this struggle between a party engaged in a hate campaign against sexual minorities and a group of passers-by, observers, and, finally, activists. Second, it is not I who unleashed this "war," since I hadn't participated in the Friday tussles with the police following Margot's arrest. Moved by the whole situation, which I learned about through social media, I decided to come to the scene of the action only after its conclusion. What drove me was mostly the perilous instinct of a young psychologist ("Maybe someone needs help?")—so I couldn't claim more than a kernel of courage, which I took with me to the statue of Copernicus, now wrapped in a rainbow flag. I stopped beside it for a second, shocked by the escalating violence, and observed the isolated individuals affected by the scene. Some*

6 *Jak rozpętałem drugą wojnę światową* (*How I unleashed World War II*; 1969, dir. Tadeusz Chmielewski) is a popular Polish comedy set during World War II, whose protagonist—owing to various coincidences—is led to believe that he is the agent behind various events during the war, including its very outbreak.

talked, agitated, others kept a mournful silence. After a brief moment, the air shifted—someone next to me made a troubling gesture, and I was caught by the wrist and led to a squad car. Without giving me any justification for the arrest, without previously ordering the crowd to disperse, without providing me with the means to contact my next-of-kin and my lawyer. What happened to my kernel of courage any empathetic reader can easily imagine.

Empathy is a full-blown channel of cognition, a fact I learned about during a training course for psychotherapists. The ability to put oneself in the shoes of another is perhaps a rare privilege—but, on the other hand, even fewer can bear the burden of empathetic compassion: referring back to the shoes metaphor, these are some heavy and ungainly clogs. As an educated, outed gay living in the state capital, I thought I had a lot of empathy for myself and the community of people I've been bound to by my sexual orientation. Over the years, I vacillated between the problematic politicisation of the issue of the rights of LGBT+ people and my own blossoming private life. Appalled by the increasing efforts to antagonise the society toward minorities, I also used all available resources to secure a comfortable life for myself. The strain of denying my sense of danger has caused my eyelids to droop with heaviness and sleep. I could breathe freely until I drew on the air of others—the insulted, the beaten, and finally, also the dead. I thought I was safe—and then I wasn't. Thrown inside a holding cell at a police station for 20 hours without any charges being filed against me, I realised I had been divested of the comfort of invisibility. It was not only my affiliation with a minority that was being politicised, but also my very identity. As was the case with the protagonist of The Trial*, being dragged into a police van became my symbolic initiation into the nightmares of a political agenda. Apart from the rights denied me during the arrest, I was also divested of another, basic right—the right to indifference.*

I think my story matters because I'm more of a Kafkaesque everyman than a courageous activist. Owing to a series of absurd events, I was dragged against my will into a political intrigue. My kernel of courage, once crushed by a policeman's boot, will now be ground for years by the wheels of the system. I'm writing this out of the deep conviction that the kernel of courage that all empathetic readers carry within themselves may very soon follow the same path—their indifference becoming my lawlessness, their invisibility my Trial. Inside a police van, there's not enough air for a "but," since both I and you, Dear Reader, live in oppressive, radical times. Many of us pant under our masks, contemplating every potentially deadly breath. Radical fear must be followed by radical empathy—there is no other way. Because of this, I ask for equally radical support. These new times require a new,

eleventh commandment: "Thou shalt not be indifferent." To each of us, not being indifferent can mean something different: being well-informed about sexual minorities, winning a Facebook argument, hanging a rainbow flag in your window. You can also "not be" in your own shoes. The shoes of another often come in the wrong size; they pinch and chafe, demanding attention. In the shoes of another, you're less likely to trample someone else's kernel of courage—and that should never be met with indifference.

Now it's October—two months later. The arrest itself still haunts my dreams—after a fashion, since I actually dream about a soft rapping on my door. I imagine or think to myself—they have come for me. It consumes my space, shrinks my studio flat to the size of the coffin-like bunk they had me sleep on in the cell. It shrinks my head to the size mandated by prison storage; sadly, "fight or flight" is oversize. And the sound, quiet and small, flies with ease from the depths of hell. I know it's not real, and yet I jump to my feet. Actually, I *am* feet, strained from the fear, as my head is still in storage. There is nowhere to go to from the attic—it's a trap as much in terms of architecture as metaphysics. An elevator to the great beyond that got stuck between floors. In five days or so, it will take me to Purgatory, the first court session in my absurd case. Perhaps the gentle rapping is the sound of a gavel. Autumn is coming, and when it is dark again, I stop asking.

ADA ŁANIEWICZ [Born in 1960 in a town of over fifty thousand (today's Łódź Province), cis woman, lesbian, lives in a major city.]

4

Diary of a Lesbian from a County Town

It's not easy to write when you know you have however many pages—maybe a few dozen—to describe your whole life. And here I am, turning sixty before the year is out, and quite a few things have happened in all those years. So, let's begin.

I grew up in the gloomy 1960s. I couldn't have understood it back then, but those were times of repression, of the barren Gomułka-era Poland, walled off from the other world and so on.[1] I was the first child of young parents who had nothing but each other and their love. They both came from impoverished homes in small towns. They had passed their final exams. Their adult life was just beginning. Mum got a taste of student life during two years in Poznań. She spent a year studying medicine, but it proved too hard for her. Father sent her love letters. She came back. He was brimming with energy, a footballer with a vocational school diploma who passed his high school exam quickly and was finishing extramural studies at the polytechnic when I was in second year at primary school. Mum never got a degree. She worked all her life as a clerk at the local town hall. They both belonged to the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR), but could hardly be called aparatchiks. Just two young, undereducated people with some interest in learning and improving their salaries and their lives. Their social advancement was down to socialism—that's what they were raised in, and they neither rebelled against the system nor glorified it. They remembered World War II from their childhood as the most dramatic event in Polish history.

My childhood was tranquil, safe, and happy. I can certainly say I was loved—by my parents and grandparents (on my mum's side). No one molested me or beat me. There was no violence at home. With time, my father took to drinking more and more, but that's something for later. Up until

1 Władysław Gomułka (1905–1982), First Secretary of the Polish United Workers' Party (and thus leader of the Polish state) in 1956–1970, a period that began with the so-called "small stability" after the Stalinist era, typified by limited liberalisation and minor individual economic gains, and ended with a tightening of state control and increased repression in the years 1968–1970. This period broadly coincided with the rise and fall of Nikita Khrushchev in the Soviet Union and the erection of the Berlin Wall.

primary school I was pretty much raised by my grandma, who was out of work herself. After three attempts with kindergartens, my mum gave up. She took me to Grandma's place every day, an old, pre-war tenement house whose yard was my whole world. Grandma was semi-literate and had lost her own mother when she was five. She could barely read, yet there was little she could do about it: she had to read me books. In spite of her poor education, she had many talents, plenty of inner strength, and a kind of charisma that gave her a lot of authority and respect among kinsfolk near and far. As a child I simply adored her and she made the most of our relationship. My mother, a working mum, wasn't that close to me then, and never would be. As is traditional, my father showed no interest in my upbringing. I can't say whether he just preferred it that way or if Grandma drove him off. In any case, the roles in my family were distributed in the traditional way. Sure, when I was older Father tried to inspire me to follow his passions. He taught me, or rather tried to teach me, what he enjoyed himself: sailing, skiing, swimming. He took me along on mountain treks, where he usually acted like the leader of the pack. He enjoyed all of that more than I did. I sure got to try my hand at everything, but I have to admit my father made a lousy teacher. I'm glad I learned to drive from someone else, because otherwise I would never have got my licence. And I did, quite early, even before my high school exam. The point was he could use a driver when he'd had a drink and couldn't take the wheel himself.

My parents were avid readers, but they preferred light reads. Mum bought more demanding titles from the "Nike" book series, but I don't think she got beyond putting them on her shelf.[2] Father would read *With Fire and Sword* or the Winnetou books over and over again.[3] He had the astounding skill of fast reading, which sadly I didn't inherit from him. There were also magazines in our home; Mum brought them in. *Przekrój* was my primary source on theatre, fashion, and travel.[4] We had no family outings to the cinema or theatre. Sure, there was a trip to a puppet theatre with Mum. I remember visiting a circus—that was with Father. But I also remember concerts—as the local "Madam Censor," Mum got free

2 The Nike Series (so named for the image of Nike of Samothrace featured on the covers) is a series of quality translations of works by foreign authors published by the Czytelnik publishing house in pocket format since 1957.

3 *Ogniem i mieczem* (*With Fire and Sword*, 1884), a classic Polish adventure novel by Henryk Sienkiewicz set in 1640s Ukraine; Winnetou—the main protagonist of a series of adventure novels of the Old West by German writer Karl May (1875–1910).

4 *Przekrój* (lit. Cross-section)– a culture-and-society weekly published since 1945 (recently revived as a quarterly).

tickets to shows by out-of-town artists; I got to watch live the beautiful ladies and gentlemen I knew from TV.

Father was all about sports, as player and as supporter. He took me to training. I was happy and proud. A bunch of grown-up guys ran all over the pitch after a single ball, and I, a small girl, had one exactly the same, all to myself, to kick about on the running track.

My parents were on the poorer side, but things kept improving little by little. I certainly never went hungry for lack of food or money to buy it. Mum says I had two skirts she washed by turns so that I was always clean. It bothered her that she couldn't get nicer clothes for me, but back then I didn't mind. I got toys, and I got the ones I wanted. There were two dolls, one of them "foreign," from a packet sent by an aunt in West Germany. This "aunt" was actually a German friend of my grandma from before the war. She would occasionally send packets of awe-inspiring goods: oranges, the coloured paper wrappers they came in, peanut butter, shiny Christmas tree decorations, and a doll with eyes that closed and a set of clothes. The doll was OK, but I think I was more attached to the teddy bear that became a stand-in for a lemur. Lemur was my favourite protagonist from the book *Much Ado About Lemur*,[5] which I had Grandma read me over and over again. No one made toy lemurs in those days, so the small, rather horrid bear became a substitute. Other than that, I had a red pull-back Mercedes. I think it might have been quite a pricey toy. I remember the joy—mine and my parents'—when they bought me a... sabre. You attached it to the hips and the shoulder with some belts. I think I may have wanted to get it, and then I did. Then there was a plastic gun that fired a dart, and when Mum came back from a sanatorium—I was seven or eight—she brought me a cap gun. Now that was special. In other words, my parents didn't stick to "girly" toys. As far as that went, I got whatever I wanted. Today you would say it was very "gender-neutral." Father seems to have been hoping I would come out a boy, so he liked it that I enjoyed boys' games. We loved to watch *Bonanza* and *Zorro*. I think he felt that the more typically manly skill and abilities I learned, the easier life would be for me as a woman. I remember he taught me, as a rather small child, how to kick someone in the calf so that it really hurt, just in case I was assaulted.

My family was pretty traditional. Mum worked her whole life and took care of the home after work. Although father had a degree, he never urged Mum to take up her studies again once I was weaned. After work, he did

5 *Awantura o lemura* (lit. a quarrel over a lemur) is a children's novel by Maria Terlikowska, first published in 1945.

as he pleased and drank vodka with his pals. She was attentive, loving, cared for me, and generally made sure our home was running smoothly. Though I felt that Mum loved me very much and always looked after me, I never befriended her, she was never my confidante. I can't imagine how things would have turned out if, at sixteen, I'd just up and said: "Mum, I think I prefer women, maybe I'm a lesbian?" Thinking about it today, I'm glad I didn't share this secret with my parents then and there, in the 1970s. I think they were totally unprepared for that kind of knowledge and wouldn't have been able to help me. They could have even unintentionally hurt me.

For nine years of my life I was an only child. I dreamed of having an elder sister — and then came my younger brother. Until he was born, I was very happy to be getting a sibling. I remember the hot July of 1969. My parents woke me up before dawn, around 3am. They wanted me to be part of the historic moment of man landing on the moon. Mum asked me to sit by her side and curl up against her because she couldn't sit me on her knees. That's where her pregnant belly was. Three weeks later, my brother was already out.

He was a major headache. He kept crying. He wouldn't eat. Every time he was suckled, changed, or whenever anything was done to him, he would just cry and shriek. Mum walked about all tired. Grandma lent a hand. Father? He was living his life. Of course I loved my little brother, though they said I was jealous of him. What has remained with me since he was a toddler is a distaste for children and the conviction that raising children is a torment that leaves you with no time for anything else. Until I left my family home and went away to study, I had a good rapport with my brother. We spent a lot of time together. Of course, he wasn't immune from the challenges that come with having a domineering elder sister. There were even moments of real terror. Once he almost died when I threw a hardback copy of *Mr. Inkblot's Academy* at him.[6] I liked to hug and kiss him. He was so soft and nice to the touch. That bond ended when a girl—and then a wife—came into his world. For over two decades afterwards, our relationship became very superficial. It only improved again after his divorce.

The eight years of primary school passed without a hitch. I think I learned the most at that school and from those teachers, but there were also educational missteps. I had a good class with plenty of intelligent,

6 *Akademia pana Kleksa* (Mr. Inkblot's Academy) is a children's novel of enduring popularity written by Jan Brzechwa, first published in 1946.

bright kids. We caused some trouble, but not too much. For all of primary school, I had no real girlfriend. I never had what you might call a bosom buddy. I was always a bit aloof. At first this was due to a lack of social experience, because I hadn't gone to kindergarten. Later on it was probably the knowledge that I was somehow different that made me keep my distance from the others. I liked observing people from the outside. I still do.

I was a happy child from a generation raised without television—at least up to a point. When my mum went away for a training trip during my second year, Father took me to a shop and we bought a TV, a model named Atol. It was supposed to be a gift for my mum, but it was really for him. With time, he became completely addicted to television. That first TV, black-and-white, broke after a few days. Still, it was on this screen that I first saw Halina Kunicka, the singer.[7] And that was love, enchantment, and fascination that lasted for more than a decade.

I should devote a bit more space to this subject because I know that the feelings I had for Kunicka shaped my sensibilities, my aesthetic sense, my passions, and finally made me realise that I was in love with a woman.

Halina Kunicka is the same age as my mum. Maybe the fascination with her came from a subconscious longing for a beautiful, ideal, popular mother? I can't really judge or make sense of it, but I can say with total confidence that Halina Kunicka was the first woman I loved. She was my feminine ideal. For the first few years, I knew her only from the TV screen and the songs she sang. I knew them all. I bought every record. I talked my parents into buying me a record player and then (as a teenager) also a cassette player. When I got my first one... I cried with joy. Every Saturday, I carefully scanned the TV schedule for the week to find out when she might be on. Those were my holidays. After a while, my infatuation drove me to learn the names of the authors of the songs Kunicka sang, what else they were writing and composing, and for whom. I took to reading theatre reviews that the journalist and TV presenter L. Kydryński—Kunicka's husband—wrote for *Przekrój* magazine.[8] I couldn't go to the plays, but I knew which theatres he frequented with his wife. So I learned the repertoire of these theatres, their addresses, the names of their directors and their actors. When Kunicka picked up works by Polish poets, I began to read Leśmian, Broniewski, Bryll. It was because of her—when she told me (it was when I was already at the university) she was reading É. Ajar's *King*

7 Halina Kunicka (b. 1938), a popular singer who enjoyed her heyday in the 1960s and 1970s.

8 Lucjan Kydryński (1929–2006), renowned music journalist and stage presenter, author of numerous books about music.

Solomon—that I immediately devoured Romain Gary's entire oeuvre, for example.[9]

I think I was in high school when I started writing letters to her. The joy I felt when she responded to one of them was off the scale. I was euphoric for a week or more. My collection included not only her albums, but also newspaper clippings and photos, and the cover of one of her albums spent a few years behind the window of my bookcase so that I could always raise my head and look into Her beautiful eyes.

Kunicka was my idealised deity. I can say that I worshipped her and never thought of her as an object of erotic infatuation. Neither did I tell Her that I was a lesbian during any of our numerous conversations. It really did last an inordinately long time—even after I'd started university.

Having feelings for an artist beyond my reach meant that the next time I fell in love with a woman, it came to me as something natural. In any case, I wasn't surprised it was a woman again and not a man. The story is pretty banal—she was my class teacher during the first year of high school.

I was a good learner. Maths was my biggest forte. I liked chemistry and biology. I balanced it all out by making atrocious grammatical errors. I had no time for boring history, with all its wars and generals, nor for crafts. Early on my grandma did all of my homework that required crochet, knitting, or needle-work for me. Delightfully crafted, they were immediately recognised by the teacher as the work of other hands, so I just got a pass for coming to class with a completed work. What I hated the most, though, was foreign languages. Cramming the vocabulary was a particular challenge.

By a twist of fate, I wasn't admitted to the class in mathematics and physics that I'd applied for (there were no exams back then, just a ranking based on the previous year's school report); instead, I went to a class with an expanded Russian programme. In the 1970s, the Russian language was the epitome of lame and no one wanted to learn it. The class—all-female to boot—was formed by the director of the school—an erotomaniac, alcoholic, and sexist—in an effort to curry favour with the Provincial Committee of the PZPR. A young, energetic Russian language teacher took the reins. She leapt into the room and paced about for forty-five minutes

9 Bolesław Leśmian (1877–1937), Polish poet famed for highly stylised language peppered with characteristic neologisms; Władysław Broniewski (1897–1962), Polish poet, veteran of both World Wars; Ernest Bryll (b. 1935), Polish writer and lyricist who enjoyed broad prominence during the 1960s; Romain Gary (pen name: Émile Ajar, 1914–1980), French writer and two-time recipient of Prix Goncourt, who spent his early years in the Russian Empire and Poland.

straight, talking at us exclusively in Russian. I didn't like her at first—in fact, I disliked her. I was afraid of her and had trouble getting to grips with the material between lessons. In the end, however, the situation changed. There's this theory that students learn more eagerly when they like their teacher. So I took to studying the Russian language like crazy. After a year and a half, I was fluent. Sadly, at that point my class teacher got pregnant, gave birth to a girl and... never returned to our school.

This new attachment still didn't flick the switch for me. Platonic and innocent as it was—as had been the case with H. Kunicka—it seemed just so natural. What of it that it was a woman again? The reason was obvious: I looked to older women in search of the sister I never had. My classmates, my peers, were of absolutely no interest to me. At the same time, I felt that my love for Kunicka, and then for my class teacher, should remain a secret. The infatuation with Kunicka came when I was eight or nine. From that point everyone knew she was my favourite singer, but back then such infatuations were a normal thing. Girls kept thick notebooks with clippings and photos of their favourite actors and singers of either sex. I discovered that I loved Kunicka when I was about fourteen years old. And it must have been then that I began to lead—in a way—a double life. I could loudly proclaim my adoration of Kunicka and her songs or outfits, but I never shared with anyone that I loved her. When the fascination with the aforementioned class teacher began, there was no way for me to discuss my feelings with anyone. It was my deepest secret, but the only thing that told me was that I may be a little different from my peers, other girls in my class.

The word "lesbian" sounded mysterious, exciting. I can't say where and when I first heard it; I read about it in a health encyclopaedia we had at home, but it was something far-off and exotic. No one saw any lesbians or gays in the streets. Besides, during my primary school and high school years, the word "gay" wasn't in common currency. Those people may have lived somewhere, but definitely not in my town. And yet... Once, I heard Mum say that one of her acquaintances was "that way" and living with another woman. I pricked up my ears, but didn't learn anything else. After a while, she told someone else how she "despised them" — talking about lesbians. Since then, I knew I would never share anything about my feelings and fascinations with my mum. That's how things stood until the end of high school.

High school was also a time of first dates. Back then, I thought I would obviously meet a boy, a man, whom I would fall in love with. Such was the nature of things. All the films and books I knew talked about it. So I believed

that I, too, would eventually marry and have kids—more likely, one kid. I even had my names of choice: daughter—Halina, obviously after Kunicka; son—Boromeusz. The latter name came from a character in a book I'd read in childhood, Natalia Rolleczek's *Kuba from the Ems Shore*.[10] Of course, I was hoping for a daughter. As for my masculine ideal, I didn't have an established taste in men at the time. For instance, I thought I liked Roger Moore, but I may have actually preferred the characters he played to the man himself.

Meanwhile, during the first year, along came... K. He was the son of one of my teachers. His teeth were as crooked as mine and he was quite shy. He came by on Sundays after dinner and we went out walking. I can't say how long it lasted, but it couldn't have been very long, given that he had his final exams in May and had to study. Afterwards he went away on a cruise and sent me a postcard or two, and then he was off to university, and that was it. I think we held hands while walking, but we never kissed. The fact that he disappeared from my life was a relief. I wasn't surprised that my heart didn't really skip. Well, he was the first boyfriend. I still had time for real love.

I met another boyfriend through Dorota, my desk-mate. We were pretty tight with one another. She'd visit me, and I'd visit her. It was she that lent me Colette's *Claudine*. I loved how cheeky Claudine was, and the lesbian undercurrents in the novel brought me to the edge of my seat. We immersed ourselves in *Claudine* during school breaks. It was our girly fascination.

D. had nothing to do with it. He'd known Dorota since they were little because their parents were friends. I met him at her place. We began to see each other. Again, it was just walks, holding hands, pecks on the cheek. I couldn't have him over for the high school prom because the head teacher decided girls from our school could only invite current or former pupils. D. attended an electronics school. For "someone like that" to be admitted to the dance, you had to get special permission from the head. That was beneath me. The day of the prom, I remember D. and me went to a screening of *New York, New York*. Liza Minelli was at the top of her game back then, worth a thousand proms.

I didn't like D. as a man. I quickly discovered I had no feelings at all for him, but I couldn't tell him that. I didn't have the courage. I knew it would

10 Natalia Rolleczek, *Kuba znad Morza Emskiego* (Warszawa 1968). Boromeusz is the uncle of the eponymous Kuba—an excitable and imaginative seven-year-old who spends his free time exploring the exotic wild of the spaces around the house he lives in.

upset him. After finishing school we were supposed to go on a ten-day cruise along the Vistula as a foursome: us two, his friend, and his sister. Luckily for me, my mum fell ill at the time and needed a gynaecological procedure. I was always rushing to the hospital. It was a good excuse to not join him. D. was dismayed, but I felt relieved. Years later, I thought we might have got intimate then, and that could have ended badly—with a pregnancy, which I would most certainly have aborted. Besides, I really didn't feel like having sex with D. The very thought was disgusting.

While I was in my final year, Michalina Wisłocka succeeded in getting her *Practical Guide to Marital Bliss* published.[11] Mum had contacts at the publishing house; she bought me the book and thus rid herself of the need to explain to me the complexities of male-female relations and methods of contraception. I studied the *Practical Guide* thoroughly. It was crucial knowledge before entering adult life and leaving the family home.

Me and D. studied in different cities. Our contact became severely limited. Even when we returned to our home town we often missed each other. He became consumed by student activities and contracted tuberculosis as a result. Afterwards, there was talk in his family that I left him because of the TB; instead, I visited him in hospital and relished the fact that the illness prevented us from kissing.

Then martial law was proclaimed.[12] Letters arrived pockmarked by censors. People wrote often in those days. I never lied to him, never told him I loved him. Once when we met, D. began to draw up plans for the future. He told me he had a gold bar that could be used to make rings. We would marry after graduation, get engaged before. The prospect was terrifying to me. After the first, pretty challenging year at university under martial law, I thought of living my life, learning things, trying things out, tasting them—and here I was being reduced to the role of a fiancée, and then a wife? Someone was staking out a path and expecting me to take it, and I wasn't sure yet where I would go. At the time, I was doing my student internship in some far-off backwater. While there, I sent

11 *Sztuka kochania* (first published in 1978, English edition: *A Practical Guide to Marital Bliss*, trans. Ray Cichon and Waldemar Podolak, Worcester 1987) is a popular sexological guidebook written by Michalina Wisłocka—the first broad-access Polish self-help book on sexuality and a major bestseller in the People's Republic of Poland (seven million copies sold). Wisłocka's enduring fame recently inspired the production of a biopic entitled *Sztuka Kochania* (*The Art of Loving*, 2017, dir. Maria Sadowska) which became a major box office hit in Poland.

12 Martial law was proclaimed on 13 December 1981 by First Secretary Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski in order to enact violent repression against the mass opposition movement formed on the basis of the "Solidarity" workers' union. The martial law was lifted in July 1983.

a letter to D., informing him that I was breaking up with him. He came as fast as he could. He listened to me say the things he'd read. He suffered. His health seriously deteriorated. I suffered too, knowing that I'd hurt him. At the same time, I felt immensely relieved. I was free. I could seek my own path. After a few years, I learned that D. had found a girlfriend. They got married. They have two kids. I was glad. We live a long distance apart, and have only seen each other a few times since then. Once, during a meeting he'd asked me for, I told him who I was and that I was glad we ended things the way we did, because I could have hurt him much more severely. Our marriage would have certainly fallen apart. He wasn't shocked. I have my proof that there's still a small corner in his heart where there's room for me.

Throughout high school, I was top of my class. It wasn't that difficult—the class was a hodge-podge of kids that didn't make it into the ones they wanted to join. Because of the focus on Russian, most teachers gave us dirty looks, even though it was hardly our fault that we ended up in that class. In spite of my generally good grades, I had one weak spot: Polish. The Polish teacher hated my guts, thought I was slow. By the end of the first year, the threat of a failing grade hung over my head. She only relented when the director interceded on my behalf, but she continued to treat me like a necessary evil until the final exam. The way she taught Polish was a disaster, but I couldn't see that back then. The only thing I could make out was that the humanities weren't for me. My parents gave me no support in that regard because they couldn't see what I knew, my natural tendencies. When time came to choose the study programme, I knew that arts and humanities were off-limits. Father argued against choosing the polytechnic because—as he put it—"a factory ain't no place to earn a living." Medicine was out of the question because the thought of having to touch the body of a stranger—and an ill, and sometimes maybe dirty stranger, at that—made me nauseous. By way of elimination, I arrived at agricultural studies. I chose Wrocław; I was afraid of Warsaw. I mean, not Warsaw *per se*, but the thought of myself being there. That instead of learning, I would go from one theatre to another or spend my days outside the tenement house where Kunicka lived.

My choice of programme turned out to have been misguided. I realised this fact by the time I reached my second year, but then martial law was declared and paying my upkeep in a far-off city was already a lot for my parents. I didn't want to disappoint them, and I couldn't switch to another programme and take up work while I studied. I finished my studies as soon as I could, with high marks on my diploma. Afterwards, I often

said this mistake cost me eleven years of my life: five years of studies and six years in a company that was really some sort of a socialist relic. It all weighed very heavily on my professional and private life. However, when I began my studies in Wrocław I didn't have the faintest idea about all of that.

There was a lot of studying. The folks in my group and in my year were cool. Wrocław proved colourful and captivating, in spite of the socialist gloom. When the second year came, the girls in my year started getting pregnant and marrying. One professor told us all that this was a major reason for going to the university—to find a husband. Today, a sexist remark like that would probably land him in hot water; forty years ago, they were commonplace. I did take a good look around among the boys, peer pressure doing its thing. The aforementioned D. was far away. I knew that once I fell in love I'd forget about him, but I somehow couldn't find anyone to fall for. Years passed, and I was still free. A virgin, to boot. It bothered me, but I knew I would never sleep with anyone I didn't love, and that wasn't on the cards yet.

I think it was during the second year that I began to write poems. It didn't last long, and my works weren't anything to write home about. They were mostly about pining for love. I wrote them so that it wasn't apparent that the object of longing was a woman. I learned this kind of camouflage quite well.

At the "cinematic confrontations," they screened a film by Hungarian director Károly Makk with Polish actresses in leading roles, *Another Way*.[13] I read about it in the *Film* weekly and pulled out all the stops to get a ticket. I watched *Another Way* on the edge of my seat, with bated breath. I remember a young girl in the next seat giggle during a sex scene—to me, it was breath-taking. I also remember my surprise and disgust years later, when I read an interview with J. Jankowska-Cieślak in which she recalled her involvement in the film, describing the painful experience of shooting those scenes. (As I write this, *Replika* has just run an interview with Jankowska-Cieślak; for me, she has rehabilitated herself—she's also a damn fine actress.)[14]

13 *Egymásra nézve* (*Another Way*, 1982, dir. Károly Makk) is a Hungarian film adapted from a novel by Erzsébet Galgóczi that tells the story of the fateful romance between two women. Failing to recruit actors for the leading roles in Hungary, Makk employed two from Poland—Grażyna Szapołowska and Jadwiga Jankowska-Cieślak; the latter would receive the Palme d'Or for best actress at the Cannes Festival in 1982.

14 The interview in question appeared in *Replika* no. 86 (July-August 2020); *Replika* is a cultural bimonthly addressed to the LGBT+ community.

The bolt from the blue came at the very end of my studies. The fifth year came, the thesis defence was around the corner, and then the return to my home town. By that time I'd already decided I was going to come back. Wrocław was wonderful, but earning an apartment in the city was a completely unrealistic prospect at the time. Leases cost piles of dough, money that a trainee could never afford. My parents had nothing against me coming back. For myself, I was terrified by the idea of living in a backwater township again, but I could see no other path to self-sufficiency. Besides, Kunicka had explained to me that backwater is a state of mind: it doesn't matter where you live—it's how you live and who you share your life with that matters. Back then, I had no greater authority than her. Before I went back to my home town, I fell in love. This time, it was a female friend from my year. In other words, the first tangible person within my grasp. At least that's how I saw it for a brief moment, because she didn't hide the kind of fascination she had for me. She came from a wealthy but very traditional rural family—and she was a devout Catholic. I think this attachment scared her. She knew her family wouldn't accept it. They definitely expected her to get married and have children. And that's what happened. She rejected me as soon as she began to desire me. She was afraid that it would consume her; she ran away from me when I was ready to follow her to the farthest corner of Poland. And so I was left with this unconsummated emotion. That's when I understood, it finally hit home, that I would always desire only women, that I wanted to plan my future life only with a woman by my side. But how could I make that happen when women like me were probably few and far between? Where and how to find them? I'm a lesbian, I kept telling myself—and I didn't even dare speak this shameful word aloud. Imagine saying it to someone else. I was twenty-four.

I was bursting with hurt. I even contemplated suicide, and it was a serious option—I lived on the twelfth floor of a tower block. At the time, my greatest need wasn't finding someone to love, a woman who would reciprocate my feelings, but sharing my biggest secret with another person. I also needed someone to accept me for who I was.

I've always believed in woman's intuition. It told me what to do or say, and when. As my confidante, I chose a girlfriend from my year, and not one I was particularly close with. She showed curiosity about others, and that tipped the scales. I remember seeing her in my room on the twelfth floor. I struggled to push out one word after another. She listened attentively. She asked questions. After all that, I heard: "I don't understand this feeling, I'll never be this way, but I accept you for who you are." How I needed those words at the time. Hanka has remained a friend to me ever since.

People notice that I speak slowly. My voice is calm. I think it's precisely because I had to watch what I said when I talked about myself. Pay attention to female forms and suffixes. Use impersonal forms. Before I said a sentence aloud, I had to "hear" it in my head, check how it would sound, whether it would ring true, seem natural, and yet not betray my orientation. You get better at it with time, but the slow enunciation is something that has stayed with me.

The six years after graduation was certainly wasted time. No partner, no way to set my life in order: I couldn't focus at all. In addition, I worked at a silly kind of company where there was nothing for me to do; we all feigned effort, but every other guy working there was an alcoholic. Increasing the efficiency of a hectare and the preservation of crops and root vegetables from disease and vermin were of absolutely no interest to me.

Father always said, never regret what's past. I try to act and think that way, but I still regret that I never learned a foreign language. At the time it didn't seem like a particular asset. My parents spoke no other language. The grandparents on my father's side attended schools in the Prussian partition. Supposedly, when they wanted to keep something from the children they talked in German. But they didn't teach their sons the language. In any case, after the war German was despised. There was a time when Grandpa visited us nearly every day and played draughts with me. I trounced him mercilessly, but I couldn't say if I was really better than him or if he let me beat him. He could have taught me German by the way on occasions like those, but he didn't. When I was already at school, my parents told me over and over again to learn a language, but I don't think they did it with conviction; they didn't make me, nor did they provide a good example, although that might well have worked. It's a real pity, especially given my somewhat limited skills in that regard and my inhibition that came from being told I was speaking wrong. If that's so, why bother speaking at all? In any case, the only thing that evokes regret and shame in me is that I can't speak any foreign language. I'm annoyed by the cult of English—the fact that a nation that exercised supremacy over other nationalities, oppressing them for centuries, building its own wealth on the injury of others, has also managed to impose its mumbling speech on the entire world.

I could have devoted the first six years after graduation—a time when the brain is still very supple and receptive—to learning a language, but sadly I didn't. At work, I just pretended to be busy. Whenever I had the chance I travelled to my friends, to Wrocław. And I dreamed: of love and of owning my own apartment. At the time, I also began... writing. It took a lot

of luck and even more guts to walk to a Ruch kiosk and ask for *Magazyn kochających inaczej* (Magazine for Those who Love Differently),[15] and get one. That's where a few of my stories saw print. Of course I wrote under a pen name, only keeping my initials. I don't recall how many of my short stories appeared in *Inaczej* (Another Way). I liked the former better, anyway. It had the atmosphere and the tone I like, one that seems to me to act on the senses. My short stories were chock full of "moments"—there were absolutely no descriptions of intercourse in them, but they had plenty of erotic atmosphere. The first was entitled "Pod złotą kaczką" (At the Golden Duck), the gilded duck of the title being a café filled with the smell of warm ginger, where people drank bison grass vodka with apple juice.

In the late 1980s, new magazines began to crop up, including *TOP*—a weekly filled exclusively with classified ads—and *Relax* monthly. One absolute novelty in both titles was the personals section. Among the ads were also those of the "woman seeks woman" variety. I bought these magazines, carefully scanned the ads, and that's it. They gave me the confidence that I wasn't alone. For my own part, I never put out an ad anywhere, but I eventually gathered the courage to reply to one. I was twenty-seven or twenty-eight at the time.

The author of the ad was named Ania, I think. Wandering across an emotional desert, she suddenly stumbled into a sea of abundance. Over a hundred people responded to her ad. I write "people" because, as I learned later on, men also reacted to these ads, often men pretending to be women. Overwhelmed by the number of women looking for a relationship, she decided to meet them in real life. Since individual meetings would have taken many months, she proposed an outing of a few days at a campsite by the sea on a specified date—summer was just around the corner. So I packed a borrowed single tent and went there. As I neared the campsite, my heart was pounding like crazy. I was about to meet other lesbians for the first time, maybe even a large number of them. I can't recall how many actually came to this little camp. A handful? A dozen? Most were a serious disappointment. Sloppy, butch, aggressive. I know of one pair who hit it off there. Oh, and I found a girl.

This would never have been a long-term relationship because W. was a mother of two in the midst of a divorce. These children were something I had absolutely no room for in my imagined life. I visited her for a number of months across hundreds of miles and we had sex. That went

15 *Miesięcznik Kochających Inaczej* (later *Inaczej*), a cultural-erotic magazine for LGBT+ readers, published in 1990–2002.

well. The rest? Not so much. Intellectually, we came from two different worlds. She could be open-minded, but otherwise she was just a girl with a vocational school diploma. Different needs, different aspirations. Our relationship also ended because she took her kids and went to Germany for good, in search of a better life.

My parents were concerned about these trips. They didn't like my way of life and felt I was holding something back. There were verbal scuffles, but we put up with each other. I was lucky to not have the kind of parents who put pressure on their children to marry, have kids, set their lives in order. No one was seeking a husband for me, no one ever called me a spinster. I always went my own way and my parents respected my choices, even when they weren't happy about them. But I felt more and more constrained by having to share a house with them. In the end, I rented a one-room apartment from a cousin.

Soon after, three events happened in succession: I quit my job; I met A.; and I bought my own apartment.

I quit my job at the least opportune moment. Unemployment has just begun to rise in the country. But I couldn't keep doing the same pointless things. I even stayed unemployed for a few months. I collected my benefits. I also went to Germany once to meet W. On my way home, I already knew it was the last time we would see each other. It was at that time that I began to write pieces for a weekly that came out in my town. There, I was noticed by two young, energetic journalists who were trying to found an entirely new, first privately-owned newspaper. They suggested cooperation. A few months later, I was working full-time as a journalist. There's more to come about journalism and generally the place of writing in my life later in this diary.

I began to read the personals again. That's how I found A., who was a student at the tail end of her second year of Polish Studies. We saw each other for three years, by turns in the room she rented and at my place, and when she graduated she moved in with me and we went on to spend sixteen years together.

Physically, A. wasn't my type: seven years my junior, an immature only child. But she had a peaceful and gentle demeanour that I was touched by, and she let me take the lead, which I found to my liking. We created a regular family. I helped her find work in the city. She wanted to teach in a middle school. She taught. First in a technical school and in a vocational school. Then in a high school. I became a local celebrity journalist, and she kept complaining about the school. We had as normal a life as anyone: work, chores, vacations, cat. We had shared interests, so occasionally

we travelled to theatres a hundred and two hundred kilometres from our home. A. had a driving licence, but never drove. I usually took her to school and then went to the office. Once, as I waited for her in front of the school, I saw a group of students and heard: "Oh, it's Ms. A.'s husband." I was tickled by this, especially since it was said in good humour. It was meant as a joke, not a dig. Just before I turned forty, I bought a larger apartment. Both our first shared one-room apartment and the other one were in tower blocks. None of our neighbours ever slighted us in any way or acted aggressively or unpleasantly toward us. On the contrary, we had very good relations with them.

I never put much stock in what others said about me or whether they said anything at all, how they saw me. I lived the way I wanted. It felt good; I never hurt anyone, and that was the major thing. I wasn't curious about whether others were curious about me. That was their problem. With time, I came to realise the folks around me knew I was a lesbian. Living under one roof with another woman left little room for doubt. I thought it was just a five-minute hot topic and everyone would just as soon get back to their own problems and tasks. When you have a life to live, you don't get excited about how others live theirs. That's how things went twenty, ten years ago, but in the current reality, as I'm writing these words, the politicians and the clergy have changed Poland. I can't say if it's "just for a minute" and we'll eventually get back on track with the civilised world, or if we'll end up walled in inside this absurdity. At the waning of the last century, the prediction that populists and conservatives would come back into the ring seemed far-fetched. I thought such analyses were a complete fantasy. And yet, here we are. On the one hand, we can no longer be made in North Korea's image. The Internet is our window onto the world. On the other hand, the amount of information each of us is inundated with is so enormous and so disorganised that many (if not most) succumb to idiocy.

Let me return to the sixteen years I spent with A. My parents didn't like her, but, as a journalist friend told me, "They love you, so they can't leave you," and that's how that went. I kept in touch all the time, and it was always fine. Father helped us renew our apartment. On Sundays, me and A. often went to my parents for dinner. When we travelled, they took care of our cat. I lived close by. I bought a second apartment in the same neighbourhood. I could always count on them, and they on me. And yet, for all of those years, no one ever mentioned anything about us being lesbians. I never officially called A. my partner. Neither Mum nor Father ever asked me about that. One simply didn't talk about those things.

It's impossible to give a detailed accounting of our sixteen years together. Ours was a partnership of equals, even if most of the chores belonged to me, including care of our home finances. We had a shared pool of money and even a common bank account. The last two cars I bought also had two registered owners. We lived simply, but we always had enough to cover the necessities. I worked a lot, as one does in a private company. A. supplemented her teacher's salary with after-school tutoring. Neither of us liked to cook; we dined out, typically in school canteens. On Saturdays we cooked for ourselves—I mean, usually I did the cooking—but we also enjoyed eating out in town. I never wanted children. At one point, when she was already past 30, A. began to vaguely mention us having a child. I cut in swiftly and told her she could have one if she liked, but I didn't want to, and that we would probably break up if that happened. She quickly abandoned the idea.

In 2005 I stumbled upon information about Akademia Tolerancji (Tolerance Academy), a week-long meeting of female employees of NGOs, funded and organised by the Women's Foundation eFKa of Kraków. I signed up and got in. There were more than twenty of us: hetero, bi, homo, Catholics and atheists of every colour. As it turned out, I was... the oldest. Most were recent graduates or still studying. The work was intense. The cohort of instructors and lecturers included many interesting figures, such as Dr. Jacek Kochanowski. Dr. Sławka Walczewska gave us an overview of the history of feminism. I was particularly impressed by a self-presentation workshop led by the immensely intelligent Maja Branko.[16] That was where I first said out loud, in front of other people, that I was a lesbian. I was forty-five years old!

I can't recall where, but I chanced upon an ad for Ania Laszuk's book about lesbians, for which she was seeking people to talk to. A. was initially dubious about taking part in the project, but I convinced her that it would be of limited interest, that our pictures and names wouldn't even appear in it. We were privileged to host Ania at our place. Before then, I only knew her voice from the radio. As the host of *Komentarze* on TokFM, Ania was sublime. During our conversation, she recorded us talking about our memories with a tape recorder, I think sometimes even from each of us separately. I kicked myself for not having come up with the idea for a book like this. We became really friendly with Ania. I remember we

16 The figures named by the author were trailblazers for queer studies (sociologist Jacek Kochanowski, author of one of the earliest academic studies on gay culture and Professor at the Institute of Applied Social Sciences), feminism and feminist activism (Sławomira Walczewska), and anti-discrimination education (Maja Branko) in Poland.

met her later at a club in the Praga district of Warsaw. I also went to the Warsaw premiere of the book *Girls, Come Out of the Closet* as one of its protagonists.[17] When Ania disappeared from the radio sometime around the summer, I felt something was off. Two weeks before her death, my fears were confirmed by a shared friend. She just said Ania was in a very bad way. She died that October. The following year, I volunteered to organise a panel on civil unions during the Women's Congress, dedicated to the memory of Ania Laszuk. Among the participants was Ewa Wanat, the then editor-in-chief of TokFM. Sadly, none of the actresses who had played roles with lesbian overtones agreed to join the panel.

Me and A. shared a fair bit of life together. We had no crises, no quarrels, no betrayals. One could say, a perfect couple. But my feelings for her began to die down. The reasons were many. We both put on weight easily. I've been on a diet my whole life. When she began to fatten up, I joked that I would leave her if she passed eighty kilos. And that's effectively what happened, even if it wasn't because of the kilograms. I'm not going to look for excuses. It's my fault this relationship fell apart. There are plenty of challenges in everyday life. We both went through burnouts at work. Besides, A. was constantly unsatisfied. We had a nice apartment, stable employment, we were in good health. We had each other. I managed our little household and she really didn't have all that much to look after aside from work. And yet she was still constantly unhappy. I looked out for new challenges so as not to let myself sink in the increasingly joyless town we found ourselves in.

When I was forty-seven, I succumbed to something I'd feared my entire life. I fell in love with a pure-bred hetero woman. She was ten years my junior. She came back to her home town in pieces. She became director at the culture house, whipped it into shape, and we inevitably met on a professional basis. We spent a lot of time together. More and more. We enjoyed our conversations, our openness. I confessed that I loved her, but she set firm boundaries. There was no way for us to have a relationship, as wonderful as it could have been. These were infernally bleak times. After that debacle, I knew I would look for another woman, that I had been unfair to A. and that she didn't really deserve that.

I've been with my current partner for over ten years. We met through an ad, but this time, it was on the Internet. Well, it's been many years since the days of the personal ads in *Relax*. She lived fifty kilometres from my

17 *Dziewczyny, wyjdźcie z szafy* (Girls, Come Out of the Closet), ed. Anna Laszuk (Płock 2006); the ground-breaking book is a collection of interviews with Polish lesbians.

town. She was a divorced mother of two adult daughters. She filed for divorce as soon as they came of age. In exchange for her own apartment, she left her husband a house. This time, she set strict terms for me. I was afraid of a radical change in my life, but the choice was clear: either I move in with her or we break up.

I left A. the apartment and everything in it. I took some of my things, books and records, and the car, since she never drove anyway. I split the money in our account in half. We're on good terms with one another, kind to each other on account of the years we spent together.

My current partner is another only child, four years my junior, retired. There are privileged occupations in every country, and hers was one, hence the early retirement. We share the same first name. We're mature, with extensive life experience. Our common life has seen its share of difficulties. She enjoys peace and seeks more and more of it. In my search for new challenges, I would at times become consumed by work or social activity. This has often led to misunderstandings, because she was deeply affected by my activities that—as I'm sure to detail further on—ended in failure. Suffice it to say that, at fifty-five, I found myself unemployed, which can be deadly for a woman in this country. Yet our relationship continues, and I hope it will stay that way until our dying day. I won't describe it. It's good. I've reached a state I always dreamed of. I'm getting old with a woman I love, who shares similar values, is open-minded, frank, responsible. She likes order, she loves animals, she gets emotional listening to good music, watching worthwhile films, she reads books. She has her flaws. So do I. We're happy together. I'd love for us to be able to have at least a civil union, since I'm sure marriage won't be an option while we're alive.

Now I'll turn to some issues I didn't address while recounting my life story. I decided to write about them separately. If I don't expand on them, this diary will lose some of its value and fail to shed any more light on all of the aspects of my identity and its development.

Stage Songs Review

I've written enough about Halina Kunicka. The artistic sensibility that I owe to her caused me to appreciate performers who sing wise lyrics, understand what they sing, and can enunciate properly. So it's no surprise that, as a student in Wrocław, I found myself at the Stage Songs Review (Przegląd Piosenki Aktorskiej, PPA). Originally, it was a rather humble event that involved budding actors or students of artistic schools. What fun that was! My first Review, and it already featured the Polish

Liza Minelli: that is, Maria Meyer, who sang and performed songs from all the musicals staged in our country throughout her career—and who had her start at the PPA. Sadly, my student years coincided with martial law, which cut short many artistic events, including the PPA. It returned when I was in my final year. The winner was the then virtually unknown Edyta Geppert. I said goodbye to Wrocław, but every spring I returned for the PPA. My university friends helped secure seats and tickets, which became increasingly hard to come by as the event gained in popularity and significance. After failing yet again to get through to any concert, I wrote to the organising director of the PPA about what an incredible event it was and how I would even sweep the stage with a broom if it meant I was admitted. A few months later, the director called me and invited me for an interview. That was how I got into the press office of the PPA, which I ran year in year out for thirteen years. In the spring, I travelled to Wrocław for 10–12 days, all of which I spent locked inside the office, manning the phones, dealing with hundreds of urgent matters, making coffee or tea for famous people. And in the evenings I ran to concerts, performances, recitals. My immediate superior, Monika Klubińska, a music journalist from Wrocław and the PPA's spokesperson, and the aforementioned festival director, Ada Kostenko, were two fantastic, charismatic women who were the pillars of the event. Monika knew about my orientation, as did several other friendly journalists who appeared at the PPA every year. Among these people, though, it wasn't an issue nor cause for rejection. There, I had no reason to hide. I could introduce A.—when she came with me—as my partner.

I haven't travelled all over the world, or even Europe, for that matter, but the PPA became a kind of "window on the world" for me. It allowed me to be part of countless musical journeys, emotional moments, fascinations, delights, discoveries. I had the chance to admire exceptional artists, both male and female, on the stage, learn music, and witness interpretations that no TV screen could ever let me see. Every year, I impatiently awaited the arrival of this artistic celebration.

A few years ago, when I was already in a relationship with my current partner, the two of us went to Wrocław for the PPA. At that time, I was no longer a part of the event. We gained admission to one of the concerts through my "review" friends; I bought tickets for another like a regular audience member. My partner went in unconvinced because the name Ute Lemper didn't ring a bell. After the recital, she was stunned. I had never seen her as delighted before or since. Her joy and euphoria were worth every penny.

Sex

It's always been a big thing. It's never been the biggest thing. Sex with a woman is the epitome of intimacy. It's kindness, tenderness, reciprocity, rapture. The body of a woman is a gentle instrument and discovering its secrets, learning its reactions, is a wonderful experience. That's all I have to say about sex.

PS. I never physically desired a man. I was certain having an intercourse with a man, something I could only ever do against my own will, would cause me to lose my mind.

Complexes

Why complexes? For most of my life I struggled with a whole host of them, starting with my appearance. I always believed I was fat and clumsy, and my next of kin only reinforced that conviction. I didn't like my womanly shape. I masked it with baggy clothing. My upbringing also didn't help. Grandma and mum kept tut-tutting: don't sit like that, girls don't sit like that; girls take shorter steps; don't look around; don't wear that skirt, your legs are too fat, your girlfriends would look good in it, but you need a longer one. They were obsessed with dress codes. Probably a result of the pre- and post-war poverty, when clothing was a status marker. Mum took me to a woman tailor who sewed various garments for me. I hated those visits, all that dressing and undressing. Let me just add that up until I was ten or eleven, I wore long braids that I also hated. In the end, I pleaded to have them cut. I've been wearing my hair short ever since.

I wasn't the daughter in pretty dresses and low-heeled slippers I was expected to be. For the last thirty years, I've only worn trousers. That's what I feel the most natural in. Clothes have to be comfortable. In a low-cut dress, high heels, and heavy make-up, I'd feel like I was disguised as someone else.

I've dealt with my problems with clothing. The belief that I was worse for having less skill and understanding, or slower comprehension, lasted a good deal longer. That's how I was raised both at home and at school. Here, my sex mattered more than my orientation. I only realised success was the province of self-assured guys as a fully adult journalist. Presumably like many other women, I had an "imprinted" sense of inferiority toward male superiors. I gave in to it subconsciously, it was beyond my control.

I constantly had to prove to myself and to the world—but mostly to myself—that I was better than them (the guys), but in the end it felt like they always came out on top. That they just up and took whatever they wanted. I was busting a gut at the office preparing every new issue of the

weekly while contributing several articles every week, and yet the owners couldn't hide their glee when signing up a man to work with me. They openly said that a Polish major with experience in journalism would put me in my place. His pay was better than mine from day one. His articles were long and boring—when they came in at all, since the man's only master was booze. As the assistant editor, I had to put up with nonsense from three successive alcoholics who were given a safe haven in our offices due to male solidarity. They may have been drunk, but they got all the sympathy they needed. Meanwhile, the rebellious lesbian shaking her fist at a world that wasn't up to her standards could only expect irritation and anger.

I already mentioned the complex caused by my lack of familiarity with any foreign language. It's still with me, and it's the only one I feel is justified.

Writing

The first item printed under my own name was a letter sent to *Synkopa*. It was a musical bimonthly available by subscription only. I was proud. That was in high school, when the aforementioned Polish teacher gave us back our tests and told me that whatever my talents were, writing was not among them. I long remained convinced that she was right, but the need to commit my thoughts to paper proved stronger than her sarcasm. While still in high school, I exchanged letters with another girl who loved Kunicka. I no longer recall how we met—probably through *Synkopa*. At university, there were the poems I've mentioned, and after that I was just always writing. As a twenty-something, I would write several letters a day to acquaintances and friends. My life as a journalist began toward the end of the 1980s and continued for over a quarter of a century. Initially, I was still mindful of my "absent talent for writing," but it quickly transpired that the things that the Polish teacher tried to eradicate were actually my greatest assets as a journalist: the ability to form short, analytical texts and a penchant for witty, pointed conclusions.

Working for a privately-owned local weekly was a curious experience. Everything had to be done from scratch: writing, photography, layout, proofreading, making out invoices for ads. At first, I was swallowed whole by the job. After six barren years, I was finally doing something I enjoyed. I was constantly on the move. I met new people. I learned. I wrote like crazy. I didn't see that the owners were exploiting me, that they were raking in the profits as the number of copies sold increased thanks to my writing. I got none of the benefits, living on the joy of creation and recognition from my readers. A local journalist writes about everything.

What I excelled at was keeping an eye on those in power. I completed postgraduate studies in management of local and regional economy at the university to better understand the mechanisms of local governance.

I also wrote for other magazines. My longest stint as a contributor was with the English-language *Warsaw Voice*. I owed it to a journalist friend from Wrocław who made piles of money with WV. The point of WV wasn't captivating, well-researched journalism. You wrote whatever the advertiser needed. It was decent money for horrid work.

Where I really flexed my muscles was in local journalism. I knew my town and the people who ran it like the back of my hand. Sensitive issues were no deterrent. I never let up in the struggle against nepotism, unfairness, ignorance, and lack of regard for others. As a member of a despised minority, I defended those who were weaker than me and defenceless. No one tried to "buy" me because I was considered unbribable. People came to me with difficult subjects, hopeless cases, when they saw no other recourse. I joked that I was doing the work that the local committee of the PZPR used to do. I never sent my pieces to any competitions—I didn't need to. I didn't have time for that. You always had to be on the lookout for events in town, follow various stories, search for new topics to write about.

Before I turned fifty, while my relationship with A. reached crisis stage and I reached menopause, I began to suffer from sleeplessness. I used the one or two night hours without sleep to think up a stage play. I composed the storyline and the dialogues. Then, in my free time during the day, I wrote down what I'd come up with at night. Writing the play helped me ward off depression, and the result was... a comedy. I called it *Civic Unions on a County Level* (*Powiatowe związki partnerskie*). It saw print in *Dialog*, but sadly no director showed any interest in my work.[18] In that firmly enclosed milieu, as in many other places, one needs to "have a name" to break through. It discouraged me from writing any more stage plays.

Even when I stopped working as a journalist, the need to write remained with me. For a while after that, I ran a blog focussing mostly on the situation in my town. My devoted erstwhile readers looked out for these pieces, which I only posted irregularly, out of personal need or in reference to current events in my town or in Poland. I stopped maintaining the blog some two years ago. By then, I had completely abandoned the town where I'd lived. As personal ties to the place weakened, activist writing no longer seemed like a valid option, and as always, I had no time for any other kind.

18 *Dialog* (Dialogue)—a bimonthly about theatre, in print since 1956.

Religion

In this country, abandoning the one true Catholic faith takes ironclad conviction and the strength to work things through on your own. Going to church wasn't an established custom in my family home. My grandfather on my mother's side went, but that was seen as a manifestation of his inability to think and reason for himself. Of course, I was baptised. I was two years old at the time. Then I received my first communion. Before that, I attended religion classes for a year. In the fusty classroom, the famished, anaemic nun couldn't contain the gang of boisterous kids. At the end of the course, in lieu of a diploma, I got a picture with my name misspelled. From the communion, I remember my godmother's black sweater. She put it on my shoulders because I felt cold in my white dress. And there was the watch I got as a gift, which I broke within fifteen minutes. Already back then, before the first communion, confessing to a random guy inside a cupboard felt demeaning and very traumatic. After the summer break, I told my parents I wasn't going to have anything to do with religion anymore, and they took it in their stride. While in high school I reached the conclusion that God was a figment of human imagination and that I was an atheist.

Sadly, while at university, I saw students of both sexes give in to a religious fervour. During the strike before the period of martial law, a cross was even brought into one of the university lecture halls, and I think mass was said there each day.

When martial law was imposed, we sat our oral exams individually. When I was taking the genetics exam, I was in a bad way psychologically. But then the aged professor welcomed me like an old friend. That was no regular exam—we just talked about things, including God. There's a healthy dose of irony in the fact that this deeply religious geneticist was arguing then that, due to natural selection, all women left in the world possess a maternal instinct and want to have children. Therefore, I, too, would eventually bear a child and live with a man worthy of being my husband. Every day of my adult life proves that the old professor was wrong, but back then I got drawn into his story. I left the room in a daze and spent the next two years or so thinking that I believed in God. Luckily it passed, and for good. At the time, I even wore a silver necklace with a crowned eagle on a cross. But that was an expression of my civic resistance to the military regime more than a sign of religious devotion.

As a journalist, I witnessed the growing, disproportionate presence of the Catholic church in the life of the local community—those clumsy pseudo-politicians prepared to do their worst to obtain the support of

the clergy, bowing to them and letting them collect dividends from our shared, communal properties. On a local level, this had begun well before the Law and Justice party (PiS) came to power.

I had my own personal tussles with the local clergy. For an article about a woman scolded by a priest at confession for wearing an intrauterine device, I was excoriated from every pulpit in town during Sunday mass. Priests bellowed at parishioners that our magazine was not to be read or bought. After that incident, our sales markedly increased. As a result, they avoided any further direct assaults, but the enmity remained. In the section on politics I will address the question of whether it ever truly ended.

In any case, my fight with God—as one might call it—though intense, lasted a fairly short time. Meanwhile, the war against the black hundreds of the Catholic Church, the depraved and the greedy, who enjoy the support of the politicians and of the "great unwashed," remains a battle against a Goliath. To me, religion, whatever it might be, is the biggest swindle in world history. Religions manage human fears and desires, as well as women's reproductive rights; they facilitate the hoarding of money and the division of power. That's all.

Women's Congress

As a child, I was a scout, and that was fine. I never belonged to any political party and never stayed long in any social organisation. Up to a point. In 2008, the first Women's Congress took place in Warsaw. I think I read an ad for the event in *Wyborcza*.[19] I registered myself and A. and we went to the Palace of Culture and Science. I was surprised by how many women marched towards the Congress Hall. Inside the lobby, long lines for ID cards; then, Congress Hall filled to the brim. I was suddenly in a world of women—harmonious and friendly. In my town, slowly drowning in Catholic conservatism, I felt increasingly isolated. And not because of my orientation, but because of the mothers dragging their children to church, nurses agitating against the right to abortion in the first trimester of pregnancy, female teachers who only dared whisper to trusted friends that having religion classes at school was effed up. Then and there, in that Congress Hall, it turned out that there were thousands of women with worldviews, sensibilities, and determination similar to my own. I quickly became a member of the Women's Congress. I was a bit of an awkward fit given that the initial idea was to focus on uniting activists from major

19 *Gazeta Wyborcza* (lit. Electoral Journal)—an influential news daily with a broadly liberal skew, in print since 1989.

metropolitan centres first. However, there was no point in letting the fighting spirit of the market towns go to waste. So I began to immerse myself in a feminist perspective on the world, which simply expanded on the principles I already followed in my life. At the core of the history of the world of women and men is gender. It's no surprise that the Church and conservative politicians are so afraid of this knowledge and demonise the very term. Thanks to the Congress, of which I remain an active member to this day, I met many wonderful, just, and wise women. The Congress awakened in me a thirst for social activism and boosted my self-esteem. In the end, thanks to the Congress, I'm now working at the provincial office for equal treatment. When Izabela Jaruga-Nowacka became the first minister for equal treatment, I hoped that things would move on from there and that eventually every province would have an office like this.[20] The need for implementing such a programme was blindingly obvious. How wrong I was; there's so few of us in the country, a mere handful, and wherever PiS takes over, the role is eliminated.

Coming out

As I've written, I first came out at the age of twenty-three, to another female student. Since then, outing myself has been a regular occurrence. I do it again and again, and when I don't, I think about whether I should or need to. It's a problem with many layers; complex; unclear.

At work, in my daily life, when interacting with strangers, I don't actively think of myself as a lesbian. We inhabit the same earth, we breathe the same air, we all need food and water to survive, as much as we need to earn money, pay the social service tax, or remember to renew the car insurance. Superficial day-to-day interactions don't require outing yourself or getting hung up on your own reactions or how they may be perceived by others. I am what I am. My orientation is my business. When I go to a dentist, my orientation is my business. When I'm at a gynaecologist's, I should tell them I never gave birth to a child, but also that I'm not intimate with a man and that I want them to exercise proper care. It's then I have to refer to my orientation, as uncomfortable as that is to me.

When I begin a relationship outside of work, there's always this moment when I begin to wonder if I'm going to out myself. It all depends on the context. In the editorial office I worked in for twenty-seven years, they

20 Izabela Jaruga-Nowacka (1950–2010), left-wing politician and feminist. The office of Minister for Equal Treatment was created as part of the accession negotiations for the European Union; Jaruga-Nowacka left the post in 2004 to become Minister of Labour and Social Policy. She died in 2010, in a crash of a presidential plane near Smolensk, Russia.

quickly caught on that I was lesbian. My own irresponsibility was to blame. I mixed up the disks and instead of giving my boss the one containing my articles for the current edition of the paper, I left him one with short stories for *Inaczej*. As a journalist, my orientation wasn't an issue because I was a goose that kept laying golden eggs. My bosses—who were also my colleagues—wasted no time sharing the tasty morsel about my orientation with acquaintances. Afterwards, the news spread like wildfire. You could say that, in my town, it was anybody's property.

When I meet someone new, there's always the possibility that our conversation will turn to questions like *do you have a family? kids? someone?* Pretending that I'm with a man, using a man's name in place of my partner's real name, would be childish. It's a game you can play when you're twenty. After that you either don't talk about it or decide your counterpart is trustworthy and mature and share the truth with them. It all depends on the person and the type of relationship I expect to develop. If I decide (which I can do in next to no time) that the person is worthy of the truth, I jump in head first. I say I have a partner and just wait for the response. It's usually quite interesting to see how someone processes the information, how they react. Some need time to reconcile with it; that might take a while. Others admit they've never known a lesbian or gay person. Of course, this is an increasingly rare occurrence. Some of my women friends got a sense of superiority from the fact that they could boast to others that they were close to me. I think it was something they could use as proof of their open-mindedness and modern perspective on reality.

Then, in 2009, an event happened that seriously impacted my life. After the paper ran a critical and apparently fairly acerbic article I wrote about the local government, a councillor from the Civic Platform party (PO)—the vice-president of the City Council—reacted. He was an alcoholic who would pour himself one and then start up his computer and belch out whatever came up. This time he wrote about me, that I was going after those in power because, as a lesbian, I would never have that power myself. No one would elect me, even as a councillor. To cap it off, he added: think with your brain, not your ovaries. The whole town read the councillor's text line by line. My bosses' response was a shrug: it's been a long time coming.

It was Friday. We were going to some work do. Before I had my drink and started to enjoy it, I called Ania Laszuk. Ania just said: hold on, it's a good topic, but not for tomorrow—we'll take it up on Monday. On Monday, TokFM was first up with the news of a councillor who publicly announced the sexual orientation of a local journalist. Then regional and

national media outlets rushed into town. White as a sheet, the councillor mumbled arrogant justifications in front of a camera. PO expelled him, but his colleagues and chums kept him in office as vice-president of the City Council. I turned off my phone at 10.30pm because friends from all over Poland kept phoning me with their support after a public TV channel ran the story—all I needed after a nerve-wracking day like this was a little bit of peace and quiet.

The conversation I remembered the most was with a certain company director, a friend of both myself and the councillor. I think he may have been drinking. Initially, he commiserated—he expounded on the unfair behaviour of the councillor, on his vodka problem. By the end, he was asking me to go easy on the man: he's essentially a poor victim of addiction with a family to feed. That's male solidarity at work. Sadly, women don't play.

I can't recall if it was on the self-same eventful Monday or the following day, but one of the sections of *Komentarze* on TokFM was devoted to "my" topic. I remember that Ania asked for comments from politicians, including Janusz Palikot, then still a representative from PO.[21] I knew ahead of time that the topic would come up on the radio at a particular time. I invited my parents over. We listened to *Komentarze* together. That was my coming out to my parents. I was forty-nine. My parents were happy that I wasn't letting myself be beaten down. They congratulated me on my resiliency.

The whole debacle ended in a tragedy. The following year, there were elections for the local government. The councillor ran for a seat again. The bloodbath that he'd subjected me to wasn't to the liking of the voters. Very few people voted for him. He didn't win the seat. He broke down. They say he drank a lot. He died, inebriated, by the fence of his own house. His friends tried to add his name to a football tournament or some other city-wide sports event. Thankfully, the proposal was withdrawn after protests. Today, it looks like they might fund a monument to him or maybe name a street in his honour. Perhaps that's a way for some to get even with a lesbian who became for a moment the conscience of the community.

I've described these events in some detail, even though I don't enjoy remembering them. I'm appalled by the idea that there are people in this

21 Janusz Palikot (b. 1964), entrepreneur, publisher, and politician. After long-term involvement in the conservative-liberal PO, he established a separate, left-liberal party ahead of the 2011 parliamentary elections, unexpectedly capturing 10% of the vote. Among its members were the first trans representative, Anna Grodzka, and the first openly gay representative, Robert Biedroń.

world who simply don't care how much they hurt another person, how tragic the consequences of their actions may be. If I had a different attitude and background, I could have broken down myself after the councillor's action, succumbed to an addiction, or tried to kill myself. For him and those who took his side, it didn't figure at all that he had trampled on the most private aspect of a person's life, that by doing so he was hurting not only me but also my next of kin, as well as exposing me to the danger of assault, loss of employment, etc. In fact, there was a similar incident, shortly after this whole debacle, when a friend of the said councillor, a local creep, began to make noises about A.'s methods at school, that she was supposedly aggressive toward female students. Luckily, several people, including the head of the school, reacted swiftly and correctly. The issue fizzled out of its own accord.

Politics

The words of the councillor made me think, and thinking led to a situation where I very nearly became the first lesbian city president in the history of this country. But let's start at the beginning.

In high school, toward the end of the 1970s, there was an attempt to recruit older pupils to the Polish United Workers Party, but that seemed as lame to us as learning Russian. History is always taught according to current political needs—I already mentioned that I didn't care at all about it. At the time, I had zero interest in history or the current state of my country. Teens are mostly interested in themselves and discovering themselves within the world. The shock came when I was 17 and me and my mum saw *Man of Marble* in an almost completely empty theatre (one of our very few shared trips to the cinema).[22] Aside from the fact that I left with the firm resolution to emulate Krystyna Janda's Agnieszka from the film by subsisting exclusively on dry bread rolls, I began to get an inkling about where I was living and how goings-on in the corridors of power impact the lives of everyday people. Still, I was more invested at the time—and it was 1977—in Janda's performance of the song "Guma do żucia" (Chewing Gum) than in the past and future of the country.[23]

22 *Człowiek z marmuru* (*Man of Marble*, 1976, dir. Andrzej Wajda), drama film recounting the life story of a fictional shock worker and his exploitation by the Communist authorities during the Stalinist era. The film was screened at the Cannes Festival in 1978 and received the FIPRESCI Award.

23 Krystyna Janda (b. 1952), one of the most celebrated Polish actors; she debuted in *Man of Marble* to high praise. She performed the song "Guma do żucia" (written by Marek Grechuta) at the 1977 Opole Festival.

I became a student during the heady days of the inception of the Solidarity movement and the onset of martial law. I joined the Independent Students Association (NZS), but never took an active part in it because, as was often the case later in my life, the conformism of the leaders and the disparity between their statements and their actions made both them and activism unappealing. Yet I did take part in the student strike just before martial law was imposed, spending every night in a sleeping bag on the floor of a lecture hall at the university for something like three weeks. I wasn't the only one to find my wings clipped, my hopes dashed, by martial law. I was still too immature to involve myself in underground activities. We were herded back into the halls of university, and showed our resistance by wearing black turtlenecks on the thirteenth of every month. These were also the days of reading books smuggled in backpacks from France, England. Horrible paper, text printed in nonpareil: George Orwell, Witold Gombrowicz, Sławomir Mrożek, Czesław Miłosz, but also *Tygodnik Powszechny* with censored texts marked out.[24]

As I began working in a city-wide, and eventually province-wide, weekly, I inevitably had to invest myself in politics. I used to believe, and I still do, that proper management of a commune or town on a local level doesn't require politicians, but good stewards. Sadly, this viewpoint doesn't seem to be widely shared. Over many years of working in a privately-owned, independent weekly, I watched the gradual collapse of political culture and ethical norms among those who managed to rise to power. Before we learned what a civic society was, local decision-makers did what they could to keep the social capital at zero. In my early years as a journalist, I thought we were still in the midst of a transformation, that the quality of governance of the city would improve from one term to another as people gained in knowledge and awareness of the mechanisms involved. Time showed how misguided I was.

As a journalist, I survived seven presidents of my town. Some I could write a book about, but in general, they aren't worthy of mention in the pages of a very personal diary. Suffice it to say that my town had no luck in its leaders or stewards. But the councillor's vicious diatribe awakened an idea in me: why shouldn't I become a councillor? I couldn't imagine being both a journalist and a councillor, but I didn't have to stay a journalist forever. On the other hand, a single councillor has no real power or clout. If you want change, you need to go all in. You need to become the president!

24 *Tygodnik Powszechny* (lit. Universal/Catholic Weekly)—a Kraków-based Catholic weekly that enjoyed a relative autonomy during the Communist era.

It was by far the most difficult decision I've ever taken in my life up to that point. Initially, I even thought about identifying a younger, energetic, educated woman and promoting her in the weekly. In the end, others convinced me that I was the best-known girl in town. I spent a year building up my own, independent electoral committee. I was well-known. I knew the problems and everyday life of the town. I was socially active, organising local Women's Congresses. I'd never belonged to any party. And there was no skeleton in any of my closets. You couldn't hold me hostage with my children, husband, or any other family member employed in institutions governed by the city—a common practice in small communities. I had no one like that. The only tool that could work on me, my orientation, had already been removed from the hands of my opponents. Everyone knew about me and they knew that my orientation was not to be discussed, at least in the open, because that wouldn't end well. So I decided that if I was going to fall short anyway, I'd better aim as high as I could. In 2014, I ran for the seat of the city president in the regional elections. I was fifty-four.

I was the only woman among the candidates. They didn't treat me seriously in the first stage of the campaign. Old party men thought a lesbian journalist had no chance. I won't go into the details of the campaign, the labour you have to put into it if you don't have money or infrastructure in the shape of party structures, only the kind of support a handful of people can provide, their enthusiasm and belief that it will work and a normal city will become a reality. When I made it to the second round of elections, leaving four other candidates in the dust—including the then-current president, in power for eight years running—the situation changed drastically. My opponent was a representative from PiS. He was afraid to debate with me, so there was no debate. Meanwhile, the two weeks between the two rounds of voting turned into a nightmare. If he lost against a local lesbian, his political career within PiS would be over. So every means possible was used to beat me. Agitators from PiS went door to door arguing that a lesbian could not be allowed to become the city president. Jarosław Kaczyński took part in the PiS candidate's electoral convention and supposedly restricted himself to two sentences about me in his speech, referring to my "peculiar proclivities." My opponent's sponsor financed a concert by Alicja Majewska and Włodzimierz Korcz in a church.[25] A friend recounted the contours of the negative campaign

25 Alicja Majewska (b. 1948), pop singer, recipient of multiple awards for song festival performances (including at the Opole Festival) in the 1970s and 1980s; Włodzimierz Korcz

waged against me among the town's elders: "Child, maybe I'd vote for that lady of yours, but the priest told me he won't come to my funeral if I do." On election Sunday, churches—at least some—resounded with statements of support for the *right* candidate and scary stories about me. It wasn't by much, but I did lose. Robert Biedroń won his race, but he had it easy: his opponent was from PO and the Church in Słupsk let him slide; there was also no anti-LGBT campaign in place yet.[26]

In case anyone had any doubts about where the new city president came from, let me just mention that he didn't invite me to the swearing-in ceremony. I dove back into the hard work of journalism. I didn't feel sorry I'd lost. I felt sorry for my town, that it had missed an advertisement opportunity, a chance to enter the exclusive club of progressive towns, a chance to clear the party folk out of the administration, to achieve the strategic goals listed in my programme; and most of all, I felt sorry for pupils in schools that were not going to provide a modern, quality education. My father, who died of cancer three days after the elections, was glad that I lost. He knew that I would have been consumed whole by this work and that it would cost me my health.

The next year, there were parliamentary elections. I was invited to take part in them and sort of walked into it. I was put on top of the list for the Nowoczesna party.[27] It was a mistake because a political party isn't a space I feel at home in. Politicians can't avoid lying—as a journalist, I had spent a lifetime chiselling every sentence because writing falsehoods earns you summonses and convictions. Again, I lost. My district is dominated by Antoni Macierewicz.[28] He's been pulling that cart for years.

The popularity I gained through writing and then participating in elections weighed heavy on my bosses' minds. People in the street associated

(b. 1943), pianist, Majewska's frequent collaborator, recently the author of many musical works on religious themes.

26 Robert Biedroń (b. 1976), first President of Campaign Against Homophobia (Kampania Przeciw Homofobii, KPH), foremost among NGOs engaged in the struggle for LGBT+ rights in Poland. In 2011, he became the first openly gay man elected to the Polish parliament, and in 2014, he succeeded in his bid for the office of mayor of Słupsk, a former provincial town in the north-west of the country. Following a stint in the European Parliament, he became the primary candidate of the united left in the 2020 Presidential Elections. He received a paltry 2% of the vote in the first round.

27 Nowoczesna (Modern)—a liberal party established in 2015 by economist Ryszard Petru; the same year, it won 8% of the vote in parliamentary elections.

28 Antoni Macierewicz (b. 1948), far-right member of PiS. A prominent anti-Communist activist before 1989, he gained notoriety after 1990 as an incessant pursuer of Communist agents in the Polish state and security apparatus. Since 2010, he has been a major proponent of the theory that the 2010 presidential plane crash near Smolensk was a Russian assassination plot.

the title of our weekly with my name, while the names of the owners didn't ring a bell. This was unacceptable to both of them. There was something else, too. My male and female co-workers at the editorial office knew I had broken up with A. and was in a new relationship. Both of our bosses were divorced, one of them even twice. That wasn't a problem for anyone. My orientation was tolerated, but what about a lesbian who switches partners? Oh, that was way too much. For this decision, my workmates ostracised me. Of course, not all of them, but that's how it felt to me.

There was no room for me at the office any more. The owners wanted me to submit to their whims. They wanted to subdue and humiliate me. That was unacceptable to me. Throughout the years of our cooperation, I had been given complete freedom of choosing my subjects and my tone. I couldn't imagine journalism without it. I escaped by taking a medical leave, then picking up rehabilitation relief. At the time, I was trying to establish my own district-wide information portal. But my heart was no longer beating to the rhythms of the town, and when you have no love for something, you won't succeed. Besides, I already lived some fifty kilometres away.

I finally broke up with my town. I now live in one that's ten times bigger. On the one hand, I see no difference in how my everyday life looks. On the other, I feel comfortable that my orientation doesn't evoke any emotions in others, that it's of no interest to anyone; I'm no longer recognised in the streets, which is actually handy at this stage in my life and in view of the current situation in the country.

Living in a provincial town, I was happy to get involved in the activities of the Women's Congress, but I never thought about becoming involved in Lambda or Campaign Against Homophobia. If I did, I would likely be the only one to do so in the whole town. It made no sense. For many years (ten?), I've been wearing a rainbow-coloured silicon band on my wrist as a sign of my solidarity with the community. I put a rainbow flag pin in my jacket lapel. My attempt to win the seat of city president also counts as contribution to the LGBT cause. The same can be said about my art; but also my involvement in the Living Library as a "book." I consider the Library a very useful initiative. Most of all, every day of my life serves as proof that I have the same rights as the other 95% of society. I won't let those rights be taken away from me. My whole life has been a testament to the struggle for dignity and respect for what I do and how I live. I succeeded in living my life according to my own rules and earning the conviction that I am a free person, or rather—since "person" is such an abstract term—a free woman.

It's time to end this diary. I'd like to continue working. With retirement inching ever closer, I've developed plans to maintain the kinds of activities that will allow me to survive in spite of the paltry pension I'll get. Politics is incredibly engaging, but I already know I will keep my distance from it. If I should get drawn in, though, my partner will pull me back. I can't say what will happen to my social activism. The situation in the country gives no reason for joy or satisfaction as I review my life until now. The years of rule by PiS, especially the past year, provide ample evidence of the failure of the watchwords of freedom, of the vision of a tolerant and open society. Three decades of work have gone to waste. By this I mean also my personal involvement and struggles in my capacity as a newspaper journalist, educating the readers. People don't want to be better and smarter, to understand, to enjoy freedom. The boundless greed of man destroys everything. And they always need an enemy that they can see as worse than themselves, even when the opposite is the case. Gays and lesbians fit the mould of enemies perfectly because they are not only other, but also incapable of winning their battles with clubs and stones. If that's where we find ourselves in 2020, Poland has failed in its pursuit of democracy and European modernity. Perhaps the situation will change eventually, but when it does, it won't be because of me—in fact, I may not even be there to see it.

[Gay cis male, born 1998 in Warsaw,
lives in a small village outside the city.]

5

Angelism

I was born in a Warsaw hospital, although I've never lived in the city. It has always been suburban addresses. For the first eleven years of my life—a village (or rather a small town?) to the north of Warsaw, and then—until today—a tiny village to the east of the capital. So I've spent virtually all my conscious life in Warsaw, but I live outside of it.

I have a full, healthy family, and the relationship is good. I have little to write about the first ten or eleven years of my life. It was completely normal. I went to school, had friends there, nothing special. Nothing really caught my attention, nor those around me, nor my parents or teachers. I remember that I even liked one girl. My friend and I talked about her assets for days. I never had the courage to talk to her. She was the only woman in my life, for whom I had the most mature affection a ten-year-old could have. When I was twelve the situation changed a little, because we moved to the other side of Warsaw. So I changed schools in the sixth grade of primary school. The situation there was slightly worse, because in the eyes of those children I was probably a bit of an "intruder," but nothing special happened either. It was only going to get bad in middle school.

I went to middle school in a town nearby. It was a messed up school. Small, but with a lot of pupils. A mix of kids from all the surrounding villages and this small town. The days of having friends were gone. If anything, I mainly had female friends, but actually I was quite lonely when it came to social life. "Bullying" is too strong a word, but I was definitely teased and became the scapegoat. The reason for the loneliness and teasing was my utter inability to get along with my peers. Pornographic films, sexist jokes, "checking out" women on the street, parties and drinking until people passed out—all that stuff began. And I didn't want to follow that path. I was completely uninterested in porn, didn't find sexism funny and didn't like the ladies, and I never went to a class party. That was the first time I noticed that I was somehow different from them.

At this point I should add that my family was conservative and very religious, and I was always brought up with these values. So I was also conservative and very religious. At the age of thirteen, in my first year of middle school, I don't think I even knew the term "homosexuality." I wasn't

only unaware that I had a different sexual orientation, but also that it was possible to have a different sexual orientation at all. So I had no idea what caused that huge discrepancy of interests between me and my peers. However, because I was a man of deep faith, I quickly found an explanation.

I decided that my peers were "unclean," demoralised, morally bankrupt and corrupt. I believed this for all three years of middle school. I thought that I was the only virtuous being in that cursed building, the only one uninterested in that dirty and mundane thing called the human body. Many years later I became acquainted with the term "angelism," meaning the striving for absolute, uncontaminated purity, for a good so pure that it rejects everything, even carnality. So, in retrospect, I see that I fell into exactly that kind of angelism in middle school. But at the same time I began to notice that I was unconsciously paying attention to the boys in the hallways, and when entering a tram in Warsaw I'd look around for men who were, as I said at the time, "friendly looking." I thought something along the lines of: "This boy looks nice, he could be my friend," not noticing that I simply fancied him. There was one nice guy in my school. I fantasised about him. I imagined us holding hands or kissing. And all this without the awareness of homosexuality. You can imagine the confusion this causes: something is wrong with me, but I don't really know what; I'm somehow different, but I can't even consciously think about it.

I was introduced to the term "homosexuality" at the age of fourteen in Family Life Education classes. I was told that it was a deviation that needed to be treated. A teacher (she taught Polish, by the way, and had no qualifications in sex ed or even psychology) said that homosexuals often catch venereal diseases and HIV, and have a predisposition to paedophilia, and that this was because (for some reason I remembered the term exactly) they "constantly crave fresh little bodies." She also said that she hadn't even known how they had intercourse, but she'd recently read somewhere that they did it anally. And, accompanied by laughter and derision from the whole class, she listed how unhealthy, dangerous and disgusting it was.

And I went along with it all—for remember, I was a devout Christian, a conservative with staunch right-wing views—and developed a hatred of the LGBT community. I repeated slogans about homopropaganda, homodictatorship, homosexual lobbies that wanted to dominate and depopulate the world, and gender ideology that aimed to dismantle Christian (i.e. my) values. And then I got on a bus and looked around for "friendly looking" boys.

That's how the definite repression of my own orientation began. I led two parallel lives, and one didn't interfere much with the other. Fantasising

about boys, I didn't remember that I was homophobic. Being homophobic, I didn't remember that I was gay. It's not that I somehow "reconciled" the two. My homosexual orientation was so repressed that it never even crossed my mind that I could be gay. Anyone who's ever repressed anything (in the strict psychological sense) probably knows the feeling.

Now a few words about what this double life of a crypto-gay is like. For example, throughout middle school I compensated for the lack of friends with a rich online life. I became a recognised user on a certain discussion forum. Naturally, I took an aggressively homophobic stance in all discussions on LGBT or gender issues. One day, just like that, I decided to create a multi-account, which I would use as a pro-LGBT activist to argue with people who'd been my allies and sycophants in these arguments. The only thing that stopped me then was the fear of being exposed, which would've meant coming out.

My online friends and I also used to text and talk on Skype. There was one bisexual boy active there, he liked to make jokes about his orientation and about non-heteronormativity in general. I was more than happy to jump in with him. The two of us were at the forefront of cracking "inside jokes."[1] To any questions and insinuations I answered firmly—no, I'm not gay. My web friends quickly noticed that I shied away from any emphasis on my sexuality. They turned it into a joke that I was bound by a vow of chastity. I liked it very much.

From then on, when someone tried to uncover the origins of my chastity, I'd turn everything into part of the joke.

Or, for example, I played *The Sims*. I always created male-male pairs. Then I'd panic and delete the saves for fear that another family member would find them.

I remember that in my second year of middle school a girl started chatting me up. We talked all the time, and had a lot of common interests. Spending time with her felt good. Eventually, we would walk around together after school until the evening, and we even went to Warsaw to buy her new shoes. On the trip I had a moment of clarity and realised that her intentions were not as pure as mine. She was seducing me, well, as far as this word can be used for a secondary school girl—she was simply hitting on me. And I blindly followed the lures she laid out. As soon as I realised this, I cut off contact with her. A bit later I wondered—why? After all, we got along great, we loved spending time together. We would've made a great

1 The term the author uses here is *żarty branżowe* (lit. industry jokes, as in, jokes by and/or for people from a certain industry), an euphemism for LGBT+ humour.

couple, and I'm not gay after all. But when I realised that she wanted something more, I felt cheated, betrayed. As if your best friend no longer wanted to be friends. This was indeed the case, because she didn't want to be friends—she wanted a relationship. And it made me feel disappointed.

And all of this made me feel, from time to time, that "something was wrong with me." And that this "wrong" meant a different sexuality. This was a huge threat. The distinction between good and evil, between light and darkness, was so clear then. I was a Catholic, a moralist, a patriot, a spiritual and pure man—and people on the other side were fallen, evil, corrupt and impure (in the sexual sense). I had constructed such an extreme, Manichean division for myself, and now I was to find myself on the other side.

So I coined two terms in my mind to explain what was actually happening to me. "Faggotisation" and "de-faggotisation." The first one came from the common stereotype that one can become a homosexual; for example, as a result of media activities or "homopropaganda." In my mind I accused my classmates of causing my personal tragedy. They're the ones who talk about sex more often, I thought to myself. My brain associates the male sex with topics of sexuality, and this is why I feel attracted to them. My classmates have "faggotised" me, I thought, they made me a faggot. The second term described a process that was supposed to undo this "faggotisation." When I came home after school and my parents were still at work, I'd turn on pictures of naked women or straight pornography and try to get excited. Of course, this home therapy didn't work.

So the only thing left was prayer. I remember vividly the words I used while asking God for advice. I used to say to myself, "I am who I think I am," because, after all, it's all in my mind, and my mind belongs to me, I'm in control of it. It sounded so logical and plausible back then that it reassured me every time.

And indeed, even these proactive preventive measures, the gradual, slow acknowledgement of my own homosexuality, didn't lead to a change in my views. For more than four years, until the end of my first year in high school, I was simultaneously in a battle with "LGBT circles" and "leftist ideas" such as sex education; at the same time I was looking around for pretty boys and fantasising about them; and at the same time I was praying for "recovery" and forced myself to watch straight porn. At the age of sixteen I had my confirmation. I chose St. Michael the Archangel as my patron saint and took the name Michael. For two reasons: the Archangel didn't have a body, and carnality was "insignificant" for me, and he was also the patron saint of strife—as I thought at the time, my inner strife

against homosexuality. And it was a victorious struggle—after all, he had slain the apocalyptic Beast! This is how I perceived my latent orientation at the time.

Middle school ended, and I went to high school. Here's my brief evaluation of that time from today's perspective. A lot of bad things happened in middle school. The angelism I contracted and, in general, the thinking in terms of absolute good and absolute evil, seeing it as such a clear division—these were later the source of many complexes and problems, which I'll write about further on. But something good also came out of it. Being bullied is upsetting, but in a way it's also an eye-opener. Really, it's very difficult for people to understand what various minorities are about if they've never been in the position of the one being verbally abused and pushed around for no reason. I recommend that everyone should experience at least a brief episode of being bullied, because nothing develops sensitivity to injustice like that does.

I went to high school in Warsaw, which admittedly meant an inconvenient commute from the village but was a blessing for me. The people at the Warsaw school were open-minded, tolerant, intelligent—both students and teachers. I developed a habit of always scanning new people from top to bottom, memorising word for word what they said about homosexuality. The group of friends I had in class had liberal views and were entirely tolerant. I liked that, although I myself didn't change my views. I was a homophobe, a crypto-gay and a self-taught reparative therapist all at the same time. I didn't care too much. I thought about my homosexuality occasionally. In conversations with my relatives, I still maintained that I'd start a family and produce offspring—and I believed it myself. But still, thanks to my new surroundings, I began to realise that my parents had a false image of me. True, it was exactly the image that I wanted, and what I wished was true, but I began to get the impression that my happy life had been built on lies and hypocrisy. That thought was the pinnacle of liberal thinking for me at that time. However, soon something happened that was to change my thinking in a very radical way.

Well, I dared to attend an open day of a dance group. If any of its members are reading this and recognise which group this is, I want to let them know that this event really changed my life and I don't know what would have happened if I hadn't been there. A boy my age, very "friendly looking," also went. We both joined the group and became dancers. And so we began to spend a lot of time together—at training, group outings and parties. As we got along very well, we started to see each other "after hours." After about two months of this friendship, I noticed that I was doing everything

to spend as much time as possible with him. Then I spotted other strange symptoms: I didn't avoid eye contact with him, I didn't withdraw my hand when he accidentally touched me, when several people were talking at once I listened to him first, and last but not least: I was thinking about him almost all the time. The realisation struck me like a thunderbolt—I was in love. I had fallen in love with a man, without even admitting to myself yet that I was gay.

There are pieces of information that can ruin lives. I think that's really hard for a person who hasn't experienced it to understand—that a piece of information could be simply unbearable. In a state of infatuation, I couldn't continue to keep my two identities separate, and all the advanced repression mechanisms suddenly stopped working. And the realisation hit me, now formulated explicitly, that I was gay. An internal conflict began. For I considered homosexuality to be sinful, dirty, impure, but at the same time, as it turned out, impossible to overcome. I was thus faced with a very clear choice: *sacrum* or *profanum*. Either *sacrum* devoid of the body at all, or *profanum* devoid of any sense of good and positive values. Either I reject the body and turn to God, or I reject God and start indulging the body. In simple terms, it meant: either suicide or a worthless, immoral life. I had suicidal thoughts, but I think they were quite unusual (although I don't know what other suicidal thoughts are)—because in my case they took the form of a rather cold calculation. As if the fact that I had to take my own life was a sad necessity that I just had to accept eventually, but didn't yet know how.

I made all these reflections on September nights. I'd sit on the balcony with the Holy Bible and try to answer the questions that were piling up in my head. I prayed, but it wasn't a good prayer. In my mind I blasphemed and yelled at God, blaming him for condemning me to sin.

It wasn't just the nights were filled with existential pain. I masked my condition very effectively, though it took all my strength to do so. After school I'd come home and lie down on my bed, not feeling like doing anything. Dark thoughts would return with their full force. I don't know if I was depressed then, because of course I couldn't tell anyone how I felt, and certainly couldn't go to a psychologist who would be able to evaluate my state. But it was really bad. To drown out the internal conflict, I focused on studying. I worked very hard, so that I had no time for anything else. I didn't get better grades, that wasn't the point. Later, a classmate told me that my abnormal commitment was quite evident.

I decided to tell a friend about myself. I made the choice based on the observation of her attitude towards LGBT people. She was very tolerant,

but still the words "gay" and "homosexual" could not pass my lips, so I had her interpret a poem of mine (it was the first poem I'd written in my life). I'll not include it here because it's a very poor poem, which should never see the light of day. It was very (self-)aggressive and had a religious theme. The friend figured it out and reacted very well. She helped me to calm down but wasn't able to answer my theological questions.

But Father Krzysztof Charamsa, who was in the news at the time, was able to answer these questions.[2] He's one of the most eminent theologians in the world—as I thought—and able to accept homosexuality in himself. This meant that there was a theological way to help me avoid committing suicide. This thought shattered the extreme dualism of my wavering and was the cornerstone for beginning my exploration.

The exploration was successful—I found the Chrześcijanin Homoseksualny (Homosexual Christian) website, the Faith and Rainbow foundation, the *For the Bible Tells Me So* film, as well as lots of biblical studies that made me believe that I wasn't condemned by nature.[3] My non-religious doubts also began to dissipate as I became acquainted with the Campaign Against Homophobia, the Lambda Warszawa association and the Equality Factory.[4] My homophobic arguments, which I used to employ in discussions, fell one by one.

While all this was going on, the situation in the dance group was also developing quite rapidly. There was a joke making the rounds that me and this boy were a couple. Everyone thought it was just for laughs, but I was really in love with him. So I eagerly jumped right in and provoked the jokes myself, by holding hands, hugging him, and giving him compliments. After a few months, when my condition had stabilised a bit and

2 Krzysztof Charamsa (b. 1972), Polish theologian and former Catholic priest at the Vatican; in 2011–2015, Secretary of the International Theological Commission by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. His coming out in a string of interviews in 2015 led to his suspension. In 2017, he published *Kamień węgielny. Mój bunt przeciwko hipokryzji Kościoła* (Cornerstone: My Revolt Against the Hypocrisy of the Church; Warszawa 2017).

3 Fundacja Wiara i Tęcza (Faith and Rainbow Foundation), established in 2010 as Grupa Polskich Chrześcijan LGBTQ "Wiara i Tęcza" (Group of Polish Christians "Faith and Rainbow"), registered as a foundation in 2018. It acts in support of homosexual, bisexual, trans, non-binary, and intersexual Christians and rejects the religiously-motivated discrimination of LGBT+ persons. *For the Bible Tells Me So* (2007, dir. Daniel G. Kerslake)—an award--winning documentary about the relationship between Christianity and homosexuality.

4 Campaign Against Homophobia (KPH)—see n. 26 on p. 82. Lambda Warszawa—an offshoot of the oldest official LGBT+ organisation in Poland, Stowarzyszenie Grup Lambda (Lambda Groups Association), active in 1990–1997. Since 1997, local Lambda groups have been operating independently; the Warsaw group is the most prominent among them. Fabryka Równości (Equality Factory)—an association established in 2009 in Łódź on the basis of a local KPH group.

I began to see hope for my life as a gay man, I decided to come out to him. He came out to me in reply. We became a couple.

This relationship was not a good one, and lasted for probably two or three months. But nonetheless, he was an incredibly important step in my journey towards self-acceptance. If my ex-boyfriend is reading this and recognises that it's about him, I want to thank him a lot.

This was the point at which this diary was first written down, even though it was many years ago. I came up with the idea myself to write about my life and the story of my inner struggles, I guess to get it out of my system. I've copied the majority of that diary here. That's why the memories contained are still fresh and go back to times I probably wouldn't remember now, or would misrepresent. That first diary ends at this point with the following paragraph: "In this way I was able to finally accept myself. And even though the relationship with my beloved wasn't happy and we didn't last long, I know that it was because of him that I was finally able to reach my destination; to stop at the end of the road that I'd been walking for almost six years, which—shorter or longer—every LGBT person had to go through." But that wasn't true at the time.

In fact, although I was already able to admit to myself that I was gay, I still had a lot of complexes and internalised homophobia. This is probably why I completely broke off contact with my ex-boyfriend, even though there was no need to do so. I still believed that I had to be in complete control of my mind—so if I still loved him and no longer wanted to, then I had to take radical steps, to sever the ties completely. But that was also the reason why, during our relationship, I didn't go forward with sexual initiation, and was even afraid of it. I was also still waiting to come out to my family.

Before I talk about coming out, I'll sum up a bit and evaluate this period of first love, hurt, and self-acceptance. It wasn't pleasant. But something good came out of it. I was a dogmatic Catholic with my eyes shut to any kind of otherness. And then I saw very powerfully that it was impossible to hold on to Christian dogmas, as I understood them then, and to live on. This opened me up to other visions of the world. I became interested in various currents of theology, but also philosophy and even other religions, such as Buddhism, which until then I'd only been theoretically interested in. In the third year of high school I even had an episode where I described myself as a Buddhist and a Christian at the same time (because, I should mention, self-acceptance did not yet mean breaking with the Church). I think that my mental crisis played a major role in opening me

up to otherness. While I was still in a relationship with my first boyfriend, I started to plan my coming out to my family. This was necessary, because during the relationship I was lying to them quite openly and I felt bad about it. For example, I lied about where I was going, who I was staying with and talking to on the phone. I was very scared about coming out and had to prepare myself mentally for a long time. When I was almost ready (because you're never quite ready), my relationship broke up and a great deal of emotions followed. I was heartbroken, as it all fell on me at once, but I had already "gained momentum"—not long ago I was so specifically planning the day I'd tell my parents about myself. So one evening, spontaneously, I decided to tell my mother that I wasn't crying over breaking up with a girlfriend, but a boyfriend.

Mum told dad about it and it was very bad. Dad even started interrogating me: what did you do when you stayed the night with him? What forms of affection did you show each other? And he'd broken up with me just a week before! Finally, my dad informed me that people who choose to be homosexual suffer and will never be happy and that I had abused their trust. I was already somewhat prepared for this kind of statement, so I answered diplomatically: I know, but I can't change it; I can't choose my orientation; you're right, but I can't help it. Quiet days followed and I don't think I need to write how I felt.

A few days later, my dad or my mum, I don't remember who it was exactly, suggested that we visit a Christian psychologist together. I wasn't against it, because after all I was still a Christian, but the visit never happened because the idea somehow fizzled out. Thank God, because that would've ended in conversion therapy, which hadn't yet heard about at the time.

The coming out to family was followed by a series of coming-outs to friends and acquaintances, which weren't as spectacular, because people I know rarely react in any expressive way, but simply say "cool" and take the news in their stride. From that point on, I guess you could say that I became completely "out" and no longer made a secret of my orientation.

An experience I should mention is my first Pride Parade in Warsaw. Nothing could've cheered me up more at that time than the Parade. I think the last stereotypes about the rotten and depraved "LGBT community" fell away then, because I saw ordinary, colourful, happy people with my own eyes. More importantly, I saw so many allies and LGBT people in one place at the same time. At that time, when I no longer had a boyfriend, when my parents didn't accept me, and when I myself was barely out of

the crisis, it had felt to me again like I was the only gay person within a very large radius. And here they were: thirty thousand positive-thinking LGBT people on the streets of Warsaw, accepting of themselves and others. It turned out that I wasn't alone.

I return to the theme of my parents. I genuinely can't remember how long it was before I got the first indications that something in their approach was changing. I remember coming back from a protest against Paul Cameron's visit to the Polish Parliament with my dad, who was driving home from work.[5] Dad quipped, seemingly in passing: "That Cameron is a nutter." I also soon noticed that mum was reading something about LGBT Christians. I don't know the details of their own paths to accepting my orientation; they'd probably have to write their own memoirs. And again I don't know how much time passed, maybe it was more than a year, but by the time I was in college, my mum was already openly expressing her acceptance. Dad was more secretive, but soon joined her too. And really, if they're reading this and recognise that it's about them, I want to let them know that they're great parents, and my mum could be a role model for all mothers. For there will be more joy over one sinner who repents...

I went to college. Nothing worth writing home about happened during my first year there. Maybe apart from the fact that—to my surprise—I already had more male friends than female ones, even though all my conscious life it had been the other way round. Warsaw, and especially the academic world, is no longer a place where homophobia can thrive. Luckily, I finally found myself in a favourable setting. In the middle of my second year, I met a boy on Queer.pl. We started dating.

I will mention a certain film screening that happened sometime in my second year. I went to see *Call Me By Your Name* because everyone was talking about it and recommending it to me. At the cinema, I got upset while watching the story of Elio and Oliver. The way things were presented in the story annoyed me. This film didn't present what had been a problem for me for half my life as a problem at all. Self-acceptance, inner struggle, the homophobia of your family and those around you—these simply weren't themes. *Call Me...* presented carnality and sexuality as something unproblematic, full of affection, sensitivity, warmth and intimacy. I left the screening irritated, but at that very moment I realised that there were still some remnants of the angelism in me, even though I'd managed to overcome it a long time ago. From today's perspective, I would say that,

5 Paul Cameron (b. 1939), an American psychologist and anti-gay activist; in 2016, he was hosted at the Polish parliament and the Polish Episcopal Conference.

not any previous event, was the ultimate moment of my self-acceptance. But this perspective may also change.

By the end of the second year I began to date this boy I met online. The relationship continues to this day and we get along well. At first we had no problem holding hands or embracing in public, for example.

We got a few unpleasant reactions: someone yelled "faggots" at us, another lady almost lost her breath out of indignation. But we live in Warsaw, so such reactions are in minority. Most of the time there are no reactions at all. Once, when we were embracing each other on a bench after the Pride Parade, a drunken man came up to us. He opened with a typical joke: "Which one's the guy and who's the lady?" But we replied in earnest that neither one's a lady, because we're both men and that's what it's all about. At first he expressed his disapproval and said that he didn't understand. But as we talked, the drunkard began to tone it down until the conversation shifted from homosexuality to what we do in life and what we're like. In the end he wished us luck, good health, and all the best, and we also wished him well, and we parted in good spirits. I saw that situation as a small triumph over this man's homophobia, although he was probably a little easier to convince because of the alcohol you could smell on his breath. Today, my boyfriend and I don't hold hands in public anymore, but it's more because we no longer feel the need to than because of fear.

My first time surprised me with how not ground-breaking it was. During all my years of angelism, I thought of sexual initiation as some kind of a turning point, a line that divided every human's life into "before sex" and "after sex" parts, as if that made some kind of remarkable difference. Meanwhile, it turned out that life with sex is not much different from life without it, and while it's obviously a very pleasant activity, it doesn't turn anything upside down.

Interestingly (for myself), although my views had shifted a lot to the left, I still attended church, without a break. Of course, I had to redefine and rationalise things a bit differently, so I counted myself as a member of the "progressive" or "open" church, but I still didn't want to abandon it completely. One Sunday a copy of the holy painting arrived at the church in my village with its custodian, as part of a so-called peregrination. The custodian was talking some extraordinary nonsense—that the presence of the image of Mary was also the special presence of Mary herself, that this copy has a distinguished character because it was pressed onto the original painting and consecrated by the Pope in Rome, that it had a lot of precious revetments etc. I didn't agree with a single word, something

I was already used to at this stage of my religious life. But then I realised that I had no right to think that this custodian was erring and that my religiosity was genuine. Christianity today is what it is, and so either I'm a part of it or withdraw from it. When this was compounded by the increasing audacity of the church hierarchy in speaking out on LGBT issues, I chose the second option—I withdrew. And that's how I finally stopped being a Christian.

Speaking publicly on LGBT issues brings me to my next topic, which is my outlook on political and social affairs. It is fatalistic, pessimistic, and hopeless. For many years I declared myself apolitical. Later this stance was no longer viable, because, as an openly gay person, I could not ignore the increasingly homophobic statements by politicians. My views have evolved into a liberal-left stance; but because I was still somehow bound to progressive Christianity and came from a right-leaning family, my guiding political values have become non-extremism, moderation, centrism and absolute rejection of any radicalism from either side of the political barricade. Unfortunately, this approach is more and more naive every year and recent events demonstrate that it cannot be seriously sustained. For example on the issue of Margot—I don't like her style and the methods employed by her collective.[6] Yet the LGBT emancipation movement is not "centrally controlled," so I can't object to her actions in any way or claim that they are "strategically wrong" or something like that. And the right wing resorts to ever more crude measures, propaganda, outright slander and appeals to base instincts. So when the whole thing with the arrest of Margot and other activists happened this year (2020), I came to her defence in conversations with friends and family. I'm radicalising, I notice it myself; but I have no other way but to radicalise, which I find distressing.

Society as a whole is radicalising as well. I can see so many analogies to pre-war times that I've recently become convinced that there's no hope. It all has to happen again, and we—as a society—will only wise up after the fact. This pessimistic view of society is not some violent emotional response. That's just how I think, rather dispassionately. I am reconciled to the idea that one day I'll have to flee the country.

When I peruse all that I've written above, I find it very sad. You may get the idea that my psyche is scarred by years of fighting with myself, that I'm a human being wronged by internalised homophobia, and that even after I've accepted myself, I still have a bleak outlook of the world.

6 For more on Margot, see the Introduction, p. XVII—XVIII.

It's true, I've got some scars from this story. For half my life, my chief value has been trying to restrain any emotions—so now I even have a bit of a problem with feeling and showing them. But at the end of the day, as I write this diary, I'm living a good life. I have great friends and a boyfriend, an accepting family, I study in a tolerant and open environment. I am winning my small victories. Sometimes I'm overcome by gloomy thoughts—this is quite normal—but I think everything's fine now.

As I write these words, I'm twenty-two. In a few years' time, I'll return to this diary and either laugh about all this, or copy it into a new file and write a follow-up.

6

[Born in the 1990s, bisexual cis woman, born and living in a big regional urban centre.]

Before

During my freshman year of high school, quite by accident I found myself becoming part of a Catholic circle. My free-spirited approach to life was treated as something to work on, a relationship with a woman as a whim, and its break-up as a reason to praise the Lord. We stuck together. Everything dictated by the principles the church was preaching at the time. It wasn't bad, and over time I got used to it. After high school graduation I didn't know what I wanted to do, and picking a random university major was totally not my style. I had a few ideas, but none that I felt really sure of. One of my friends got me a job helping some nuns she knew. I was to look after children in need of care and see if that kind of work suited me.

In the beginning it was just as expected. Not too easy, as everything was new. Every day was a challenge. The therapy staff was very diverse, both in terms of age and religion. People in their 50s, their 30s, and a few young people, some nuns and some lay people—people like me. Ordinary. The ward sister was also one of the managers. She was a nun who often had the first and last word, plus she handled things that we, people with little medical knowledge, didn't have the faintest idea about. She did everything thoroughly and meticulously. It impressed me, in a way. When she fed the children she would smile, and when she thought no one was watching she would sing them to sleep. It seemed as if she loved them with all her heart. Towards the rest of us she was rather cold, and used to tell us off for even the smallest act of negligence. She was tall, and wore large black glasses on the tip of her nose, concealing a pair of beautiful brown eyes. Although I tried not to show it, I couldn't help watching her surreptitiously.

Autumn

The leaves turned yellow, and I failed to notice; I didn't even realise how quickly the time had flown by. Months passed, and over time I began to get to grips with the equipment, catching up with the job's rhythm. However, like every autumn, I started feeling low. I have a cheerful disposition and try to make others laugh, even when the only way to achieve that is to laugh at myself. Autumn takes away the sunshine and more often than not puts me in a gloomy mood. I think the people around me are aware of this.

I'll never forget one of the autumn days, when a text message popped up on my phone: "I can't bear to look at how sad you are. If you'd like to chat, or have a cup of tea—let me know." I didn't know the number at the time, but the person who texted me that day changed my whole life.

There was no 'before'

The text has been sent by my ward sister. We have to give her a name. Let's call her... Mia, that'd be fine. So Mia texted me. I remember thinking for quite a long time how to reply. I didn't really feel a lot of emotion, other than surprise. I wrote back. A little while later we were already set to go for a walk the following evening. As befits the end of October, the walk chilled us out considerably. As we wound up close to my flat, tea seemed a good idea. We chatted the whole time.

I didn't expect that we'd have so much in common to talk about. We discussed our childhoods, work, teenage years, books, passions, travel, and life in the convent. This was the same Mia who had worked with me, only this time her attention was focused on someone other than the children. From that evening onwards, we texted a lot. Every day began and ended with a text message from her. We got to know each other, started to share each other's sorrows, joys. Mia would often speak about her loneliness, which was an experience completely unfamiliar to me. At work we acted as usual. Maybe a few people noticed that we started to get along better, nothing more. After all, getting along at work is essential ☺. We were meeting more often and our conversations lasted well into the night. Normally in a monastery this probably wouldn't have been possible, because the doors close at 10pm, after which no one leaves or enters. The only exceptions were people who had work tasks outside the house and came back at different hours. Like Mia. Sometimes we were together until midnight, other times she didn't get back until 3 am. Now that I think about it, I can see that we tried in our own way to freeze time and just be together a bit longer. I had never slept so little before. On one occasion I asked her to just stay the night. She had stayed plenty of times before anyway, although no one mentioned it out loud. My suggestion was to introduce just a single change: we'd go to bed, and around 5 am she'd go back to her place before everyone else got up. I won't forget that night. Mia considered for a while and decided to stay. I remember offering her that I could sleep on the mattress next to the bed. She refused. That was also the first time I saw her in a different outfit. Under the habit ... she was wearing a dress.

We didn't label this thing of ours. It was safer that way. Neither of us dared to name something that had no right to happen.

I was unable not to love her

Ever since that night, I couldn't sleep, eat or stop thinking about her. And from the moment I realised what it really meant, my stomach hurt too. My brain was running a million thoughts a minute. I just didn't know what to do about it. And the prospect of falling in love with a nun, a story that does not augur a happy ending, made me nauseous. I told myself every day that we were friends, we got on well and that was fine. It should stay that way. Out of concern for myself I tried to keep this at bay, because I knew that a greater emotional commitment would cause me a lot of pain. There were two options for how to proceed. One—I'd tell her and then immediately sink into the floor, or two—I'd tell her, wait for a reaction, and only then sink into the floor. I thought about it, and decided to do it. I went. No beating around the bush and it was over. Only after a short while did I realise that it wasn't over after all, because I wasn't the only one in love nor the only one who had no idea what to do about it. I went back to my room that day and cried the entire evening. I was furious with myself for being in such a situation, for letting something like this happen at all, for messing up Mia's life. I was also angry at the whole world that we couldn't just be together. And we couldn't, not just because we lived in homophobic Poland. Our situation was doubly bad. From then on, some of our conversations veered towards trying to decide what to do next. The first idea was that we'd pray that God's will be done and see what would happen. As the prayers didn't yield any plot twists, because our feelings weren't changing, we had to look for a different solution. One evening Mia came to me and said that, having reflected on her whole life and on us, she had decided that she wanted to leave the convent—whether I wanted to be with her or not. I was aware of what her life there was like. I knew that it had bothered her for a long time. However, I was also convinced that there were now emotions at work, too. Even though she was quite a bit older, I had to throw the proverbial bucket of cold water at her and tell her that it wouldn't be all roses once she'd made that decision. And so for the next few days I tried to convince her that she shouldn't. I don't know whether I was persuading her, or myself. I knew that if she decided to leave, our paths would come together and we would have to take responsibility for each other. Me, a 20-year-old, just yesterday with no life plans, and today about to enter into a serious relationship with a mature woman who had life experience in spades. Well. What was done could not be undone. We plunged into this together.

Together

I thought that we had been together for quite a long time, and leaving was really just a formality in my mind. However, I was very wrong. The moment Mia told her top superiors that she wanted to walk away, all hell broke loose. They made her meet with priests, attend hearings. They even wanted to send her to a house of silence for six months. When threats and coercion, under the pretext of keeping the vow of obedience, all failed, they tried to bribe her by agreeing to things that were previously denied to her, despite her pleas. Eventually, when they realised that this was her final decision, they tried to humiliate her and make everything as difficult as possible. Until her departure, she was to attend all prayers and wasn't allowed to leave the house. They checked that she was in her room in the evenings, and when she wasn't, they called to see if she was in the house and when she'd be back at hers. No one seemed to care that she'd have to move out in a few weeks, and yet she had nowhere to live or anything to wear. All that stuff was so hard for us. But it was also a proper test. I think if we hadn't been tough and determined to be together, it would've been difficult to get through it. Mia had spent a good few years there. She didn't know how bank transfers worked, how to rent a flat; she barely knew how much bread cost. She went in as a young girl, the correct mindset was imposed on her, and she was made into a person who was not well equipped for life. I don't want to blame anyone. It's sad, but she joined out of her own volition. Tearfully, she said she thought we wouldn't manage and I didn't know what to say to her, even though there was no fear in me. She was deeply frustrated because the council had to come together to grant her leave, or a three-month furlough as it was called, before she could actually leave the congregation. She wanted to settle everything in a 'legal manner' and not just run away. After the three months, she was finally supposed to sign the document of leave. Mia only once described what the council was like. She never wanted to mention it again. She compared it to the Final Judgement.

Condemned Mia on one side, and all the rest of the saints on the other. Questions were being asked about all sorts of things, including intimate matters. There were accusations that she should've come and asked for help when she noticed something was going on. For me, the ordeal would've been very humiliating. For her it was probably even more so. I wasn't affected by it all directly. There were a few quips in my direction: that maybe if she hadn't hung out so much with the lay people, it wouldn't have happened. And I lived in a constant state of stress, just to make sure they didn't connect the dots, so that nobody would by any chance think of us as 'us'. I was very

dependent on them. Anyway, communities like that have a wide network of contacts. After a couple of weeks, it was all over. Mia was free.

Fields of joy

At first, it wasn't all perfect. We didn't have a penny to our names, but we had each other. This was our stable foundation.

As of today, we've been together for several years. We are living together. Sometimes I think to myself that, all in all, we have something grand, something that most other couples don't have. We are able to enjoy literally every moment we share. It wasn't always like that. Our families have somehow accepted our relationship, or at least never made us feel that they are against it in any big way. My friends have disappeared, and Mia basically didn't have any. We're still close to God. We feel he has given Himself to us, but we don't attend church. We're not able to listen to all that stuff. In public, we don't function as 'us', even though we live in a big city. We have to rubber stamp certain things, or maybe we're simply afraid of the reactions. I admire and am grateful to the LGBTQ+ activists for what they are doing for the community as a whole, but I'm just afraid. Of violence and aggression. Sure, I'd like to brag about it to everyone. Sure, I'd like everyone to celebrate our love with us. Sure, I'd like to hear some positive things on TV about people who live in a similar set-up as we do, and not just the constant verbal abuse and insults. However, I don't really think about all that every day. Instead, I wake up every morning next to Mia, catch rays of sunshine beaming from her eyes, eat breakfast with her, laugh, argue. We have a million ideas on how to live the rest of our lives. We want to work, save money and visit the farthest corners of the world. We want to explore, try, taste. We want to desire and genuinely feel. We want to be together in all of this.

Mia was far too lonely for the immense love she holds, too subdued for all the energy she has, and too miserable for the beauty she carries within her.

I'm grateful for this love, which, after all, had no right to happen.

[I was born in the second half of the 1990s in a large town, and moved back there several years ago. My hometown has less than 50,000 inhabitants. I identify as bisexual. I was prompted to describe our story by the guarantee of anonymity. I always wanted to share it with someone, because before that happened to me, I had felt that such stories were made up and only written by opponents of the church to sow chaos. I also always had the impression that most of the stories of LGBTQ+ people I encountered were just sad. Ours is not like that. Thankfully ☺ I hope it'll offer some hope to all those who feel they're in a hopeless situation. The story is told in a nutshell, as an easy pill to swallow. From our work experience we know that sometimes a pill is enough ☺. All the best to you!]

♥ ☞

7

MIA [I was born in a small town at the turn of the 1980s, but I've been living in a big city for years now. I graduated from a medical school and have been in the profession for over a decade. Although I don't hide the fact that I'm a lesbian at work, I've only experienced a negative reaction once. None of the staff ever showed me any dislike or contempt. I don't want it to be held against me that I'm an ex-nun and also a lesbian. That's why I prefer to remain anonymous; out of care for my parents, who live in a small town where everyone knows everything about everybody else.]

Uncaged

She just started work with us. So fascinating, stubborn and obstinate. That really tickled me. I couldn't stop thinking about her. She acted tough and strong, but the way she looked after those sick kids was so warm and delicate. Only she had the courage to challenge my authority. I was one of her superiors, but I think I wished our relationship was different, more friendly, more open.

We went for a walk together, though I don't think she liked me at all. She didn't say a word. I was freezing, but still elated to be with her for this brief while. Then we went to her place for a prickly pear tea. Somehow, the tone shifted, and we passed the evening confiding in one another, both of us taking a chance trusting the other. I'd never said so much about myself to someone so new to me. She was also very open with me, and that felt like it wasn't something she was used to. She told me about her relationships with guys, but also with women. I really can't say why that surprised me, but it only increased my fascination. I, a nun for umpteen years—and her superior at work—sat with rapt attention, listening intently to this young girl who had lived through so much. I don't think I ever felt so easy with anyone. We sat in the room she rented and shared our lives, memories, and experiences.

Every passing day brought us closer to one another. She always said there would never be any judgment in her room, and I really felt that. I was free from the burden of opinions. That's also how our relationship developed. I was surprised how well we got along together, even though she was several years younger than me, how much growth she'd been through for someone so young. My life, so grey and boring, began to become more colourful. Every day, I waited for her to drop by my office, as if just so. She would ask me about the choices I'd made, what my childhood

was like, what my family was like. All of those incisive questions led me to analyse my own past. I started looking at my life through the eyes of a grown woman, no longer so scared of life. I thought about my family, about the quarrels, the empty cupboards, the pointlessness, and the dreams of escape. Back then, I knew I wouldn't be able to afford to go to university. My two younger siblings were still at home, and mum earned a pittance. It was only then that I mustered the courage to admit to myself that I became a nun to escape. I became a nun because that meant I would leave home fast and go somewhere mostly safe, where I wouldn't have to worry about having a job, about having a place to stay, about what I was going to eat. The only problem was that I was lonely. I didn't like being lonely. I struggled with it and it really hurt.

I was nineteen when I joined the convent and I knew next to nothing about what I really wanted. I've been trying hard to not want anything ever since I was a little kid because dreams cost money, and we didn't have any. In a small town of a couple thousand people, there was little room for self-development and hardly any support for children of alcoholics. I had a few acquaintances and friends, but I wouldn't talk about my deepest desires even with them. There were also two 'boyfriends', but they didn't make my heart beat fast enough for anything more than friendship. As much as I felt I needed someone, neither of them could ever be that for me. My choices led me away from my dreams and desires and toward the only future I thought I could hope for. So I joined the convent. I got my nursing degree in the convent and dived head-first into work with ailing children. Many of them were abandoned by their parents and needed so much warmth and care that I could forget about my own wants and needs. I was actually satisfied with what my life was like because my expectations weren't any more than that. The one thing that bugged me was the lonely nights, this hunger inside, a strange sadness. I never expected life to just give me anything like that, for free. And then she came.

She was the first person who asked about me, about what I felt, about how I was doing. The only one who worried about me when I was going back from hospital alone in the middle of the night because I'd just driven a child there. Back then, she showed genuine concern and dropped everything to escort me to the doors of the convent. So strong, yet so gentle. She fascinated me so much that I couldn't stop thinking about her. I'll never forget the time when I visited her in her room and sat down to watch some movie with her late into the night. I had a big headache, so I took my veil off and rested my head against the side of the bed. She reached out and stroked my hair. The simple gesture sparked so much love and bliss in me

that I wanted to stay like this forever. But I left, as much as I didn't want to. It wasn't all that far, but the convent closed up for the night and we weren't allowed to wander around after dark without the Sister Superior's knowledge. Luckily, I had the keys to a back door, which is how I could see her again outside of the hospital. From then on, a kind of routine set in. I sneaked out late in the evening and got back around 3am. Just to be with her for a little while, to talk. One night, she asked if I wanted to sleep over. She had a mattress, but I decided we could fit together on the bed. Having to take off the habit made me uneasy, but I quickly waved that away because I really wanted to be near her. I lay on the edge of the bed. She hugged me and drew me close. In that moment, I knew I wanted to stay like this forever. Something in me broke, or maybe broke out. Something I had stashed away as deep as I could, where I didn't dare even look. It was me; me, who wanted to feel alive. Me, full of love and wanting to be loved. Me, born again.

I realised I was in love with her. Not as one loves a woman or a man, but as a human being who understood me without words, who I could share my life with, who was my other half. A revolution had broken out in my mind. Everything that happened was revolutionary. Little by little, I realised how scared I'd been to express myself and be my real self. I wanted to be accepted so much that I'd pushed all my true beliefs and desires to the side. Now, an adult woman, I found myself at a crossroads. It dawned on me how much life I had ahead of me and I knew I wasn't going to let another day go to waste. Not anymore! What I wanted was to live fully and to finally take up the fight for my own happiness. After all, you can't love thy neighbour if you don't love thyself.

In the meantime, there was our first kiss, which surprised us both. It was harder and harder for me to leave. All I wanted was to be with her. Now that we were aware of our feelings, we didn't know what to do about them. She didn't want me to change my life. She was afraid that I would come to regret it if I left the convent. I knew I didn't want to live without her. I knew my family and relatives would find it difficult to accept, but I was fighting for my own happiness, not trying to please them. I'd seen sadness, disillusionment, and bitterness growing inside me long enough. They made me unpleasant and rude to those I worked with and those I lived with. I knew that if I let things stay this way I would end up a miserable wretch.

And so I didn't. The whole process of leaving the convent and talking to superiors was horrid. If it wasn't for that love that I would do anything for, I don't think I could have made it through. The sisters pushed me to

undergo therapy. I refused, but they dragged me there anyway. I must have been extremely stubborn and resolute because the therapist just told them to leave me be and let me go. So I went, with nothing but the jeans and the blouse that she bought for me. With nothing but my love and my freedom. But I felt like the richest person in the world. I felt like I owned the world!

I still see myself as a believer, and I trust that God loves me and is above all human divisions. I don't think I did anything wrong by loving another woman, by leaving the convent. God is neither a man nor a woman—they're a Person. They loves us both, and that's why they gave us one another. I never turned away from God or from the Church, but the Church turned away from what I truly was. Now, I am real, free, and happy. As the Bible says: "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." That's what happened to me. It made me a better person. Anyone who knew me then and still knows me now will attest to that. There are times I regret those fifteen years of glorious youth, but then I realise we may never have met if things hadn't happened the way they did. All of that was just me waiting for her. Waiting for someone who could ask me the questions that would help me find and understand myself. Waiting for someone who would love me just so, for who I was. Waiting for someone to lead me to freedom, to let me out of that cage I'd spent so long building up. Waiting for someone that I could breathe freely with, that I could live fully with, that I could realise my dreams with, and that I could love.

I decided I would let my family know gradually. First, I told them I didn't want to be a nun anymore and that I was going to leave the convent. I explained I wanted to live fully and to enjoy my life. After a while, I think they noticed it on their own that I was in love. I wouldn't hide it—not from them, not from anyone. To my surprise, my close-minded parents showed plenty of understanding and respected my choice, though I know they would have preferred it if things stayed the way they were. In my new workplace, I also made things clear from the start. I wanted to know immediately if I was going to get any grief. But the medical professionals turned out to be very accommodating. There wasn't even a hint of intolerance or disapproval. What's it to them, anyway—it's my life! My brother used that tense moment to come out as gay as well. He'd been hiding it for years, afraid of rejection and social stigma. My courage inspired him, too.

We've been together for several years now. We live together, we're engaged, and we're making plans for a long and happy life, though I don't think that'll be in Poland. I would love to be able to express my feelings

for her in public without fear. I would love to show my love anywhere and everywhere. To hold her by the hand without wondering if someone's going to slash the tyres in our car or call us names in the street. I sometimes think most people don't care about those things, but the political and social propaganda is working. It's been even harder these days, with all the things happening in the media. Even getting along with my parents is a struggle.

There was a time when I hid my love. I don't want to hide it anymore. Looking back, I can't believe that we managed to hide our love from the hospital staff and from the nuns. Some did see it, though—the kids at the hospital. They don't judge. They don't talk, so they can keep secrets. But they do share smiles, and I think they've always been rooting for us.

[Note from 2023: This September, our relationship became even stronger through marriage, which we celebrated in Portugal.

With warm and sunny greetings, Mia]

8

TOSIA [Born 1976 in Cieszyn, a town of over 30,000 inhabitants; trans woman, lesbian; lives in Wisła.]

kTość(ka)[1]

I'm Piotr (although I don't like that name, not to mention its diminutives).[2] Before I was born I was supposed to be a girl—it's a pity it didn't work out that way back then. I was born on a Wednesday. Half an hour past high noon, just like in westerns. Maybe it's a good thing, as at least there was no corpse. Bang-bang. Nor tumbleweed rolling across the road. Although, for some time now, the characteristic music before a duel has been ringing in my ears (supposedly it's a result of stress). I was a breech baby—a birth that's still considered high risk. Well, nobody said that life was all roses, and eating bread rolls doesn't help a woman have an easy delivery. In addition, I peed on a nurse immediately after coming out of the womb. According to the medical staff, that was a sign of my attitude toward the whole world: that I wasn't going to give a *hit and I'd piss all over everything. Well, another unproven prediction and the omnipresent irony of fate.

Right now I'm 44, and for over 17 years I've worked in a public library (until today—we'll see what happens after the elections).[3] I'm married and I have a wonderful 11-year-old daughter, who's like a carbon copy of me, my real self (for example she says: "Daddy, when we go to a shop together, why don't you do your eye make-up?" or: "Daddy, have you seen it?").[4] I graduated from university with a specialisation in philosophical and social education. Me and my brother, four years my senior, were brought up by my mum. My father was a non-commissioned officer in the Citizen's Militia,[5] sadly he committed suicide (shot himself at home with a service weapon)

1 A pun on the pronoun *ktoś* (someone) and the name Tosia (diminutive form of Antonina), with feminine inflectional ending *-ka* in parentheses.

2 The author uses masculine grammatical forms in the first person until later in the text.

3 The author is referring to the Presidential Elections of 2020, during which incumbent president Andrzej Duda made the fight against the "LGBT ideology" the primary slogan of his campaign, announcing the continuation and expansion of discrimination against LGBT+ persons (see Introduction, p. XVI).

4 The verbs Tosia's daughter uses to describe her in these quotes are in the feminine form, while tata (Daddy) remains in its original masculine form.

5 Milicja Obywatelska (lit. Citizen's Militia)—the regular police force in the Polish People's Republic, reformed after 1989 as Policja (Police).

when I was 7 years old. I mention this because my brother doesn't question or seemingly even think about his gender identity—in other words, I can risk saying that in relation to a "certain" part of society he is considered normal. We haven't talked about this issue, at least not yet.

Since childhood (primary school), I've felt comfortable in clothes designed for the opposite sex, opposite from my "found" one. I'd like to say that I feel good wearing women's clothes, that they fit me like "my own skin"—except that I don't feel good in the latter. So I'll write that I feel natural wearing them.

My classmates sometimes noticed my different (?) behaviour and said that I sit like a girl or walk like a doe. It was just my natural way of sitting, I didn't see it as something improper, and they weren't criticising me but simply stated the fact with a smile. However, I won't talk about my "naïve" romanticism—life showed me just how naïve it was, in the most brutal of ways. It's a universal, or unisex, "affliction." My mother coined the phrase that when she didn't know where I was, all she had to do was look for a group of girls and she'd find me there. But I didn't just like spending time with girls, I was also friends with boys. I played with soldiers, toy animals, and so on. But I had better relationships with girls. I didn't mention to anyone that I preferred to wear women's clothes and that I felt good in them. When circumstances allowed, I wore dresses or skirts at home. Once my mother "caught" me walking around in tights, but she didn't tell me off.

I didn't show it off outside home, except for my hair, dyed blond. Now I wear it long again—before I go bald, now that the receding hairline's started to appear. Just as I've always dreamed (the long hair, not the receding hairline). Someone always stood in the way, claiming that with my ponytail I look like a drug dealer. More than once I got the proverbial "gift" for my long hair at vocational high school, the kind the Martians received from the Poles in the popular joke.[6] Once my brother couldn't stand my long hair and took me to a well-known hairdresser. You can imagine the look on my brother's face when he saw that he didn't give me a man's haircut but something like a longer bob, with the fringe straightened with a flat iron. I looked like a blonde model, for real. I have a slim build—I could use a bit of fat here and there—with reasonably long and shapely legs (which annoy my female colleagues at work), I'm 173 cm (5'7") tall, although it says

6 The joke in question goes something like this: American astronauts land on Mars and are greeted by Martians. Surprised at the orderly and civil reception, the Americans then learn that the Poles had visited a few years before, and even brought gifts. "What gifts?," ask the Americans. A Martian replies: "What did they call it?... ass-whipping!"

176 cm (5'8") on my ID card, I have a small butt and flat breasts—I sometimes try to accentuate them by wearing breast forms. My knowledge of these unfortunately came in handy when a dear work colleague of mine developed breast cancer and had to undergo a mastectomy. We browsed bras and prostheses together.

A few years ago, I had a "coming out" at work—my female colleagues' reactions were not negative. I'd say they have diplomatically accepted it. They help me sometimes with my make-up or take care of my hair (which I wear in plaits). And as time went by and I began to attract interest on social media, they started saying that thanks to them I could be myself, as Tosia. Oh, right: one of my colleagues from work "christened" me with the name Tosia. She thought it suited me, and it stayed that way. Sometimes they call me Tocha, when my particularly "nasty" (?) side comes out. And other times, when they want something from me, they call me Antoinette, which sounds "sophisticated" to them. Well, sometimes they say that as Tocha I'm a typical bitch (my sister-in-law used the term: a typical "rude office worker"). My colleagues also said that whenever I wear high heels or a skirt they can see I'm happy and cheerful.[7]

I'm told that at work it's hard to guess my biological sex over the phone, and readers at the library address me as "Ms" when I speak to them. I like that, and every so often there are funny results. For example, a reader who has just spoken to me on the phone comes in to borrow books. My female colleague is on duty, and the customer says she's just talked to a nice lady who promised to put aside the books for her. Later, the colleague goes running around the office asking who this reader had talked to. It takes a while for her to realise it was me. On the other hand, I haven't encountered negative attitudes among readers—at least not that I'm officially aware of. At work I've had positive reactions. For example, one reader's embarrassment that I had painted my nails, while she, "such an old hag," didn't have her nails done, adding that she would paint them after she came home. Another time a reader came back after I'd served her and told a girl from work that I must be very brave to paint my nails. She said she'd always dreamt of dyeing her hair, but was afraid of other people's opinions. Another reader cheerfully pointed out: oh, we have nail polish in the same colour. There was, though, one reprimand from someone else at the library. She said: why aren't your nails painted? That's true, they weren't—right now I have red hybrid nails, laminated eyelashes and eyebrows done, and

7 The adjectives Tosia's colleagues use to describe her in this section are all in the feminine form.

tomorrow I'll get a pedicure, hybrid as well. Nails are always a hot topic, as they're the first thing customers notice—and I spend most of my time in the book collections department.

When it comes to clothes, unfortunately I'm not yet brave enough to go out dressed like this and feel relaxed about it. In autumn and winter I can allow myself to wear high-heeled boots and skirts, as the latter can be covered by a longer sweater and the former are hidden in the snow. Once I left for work, looking particularly fit with my hair loose, and wouldn't you know, car drivers were honking at me (at least when they saw me from the back). I wonder what their expressions were like when they looked back at me from the front. Another time, I was walking home from the bus stop in high heels. It took me over an hour to finish the 2.5 kilometre route, as I strutted every step, and sashayed.

Two years ago I had a painful incident at work. An acute bout of tetany—not enough micro elements and water in my diet, as well as a large amount of Coca-Cola: I've drunk it since I was a kid. Like water. I could easily guzzle down a coke or a Pepsi and go to sleep. But ever since that incident I haven't taken a sip. Oh, by the way, I automatically start to yawn after coffee. So I no longer drink that either. The short version is that during that painful seizure I mentally said goodbye to everyone and fell down "dead." I woke up as they were taking me to the ambulance, where I went through a second "death" after a hyperventilation attack. I woke up in the Emergency Department. The doctors didn't know what was wrong with me, and ruled out an epileptic seizure. A CT scan of my head showed a small subarachnoid cyst. I had consultations with a neurologist and a cardiologist: everything was fine. The results of the blood and urine tests were normal for my age. There were only some changes in my lungs from a childhood bilateral pneumonia with no fever, making the cardiologist ask me if I smoked from time to time—he analysed my lungs with an ultrasound machine. I said no. But it got me thinking, so I asked the doctor whether there was something wrong with my lungs. And it turned out that the doctor knew me somehow, and since I was an artistic soul, he inferred that artists like to smoke. Since then I've developed symptoms of anxiety neurosis, fearing another seizure, but I'm getting better every day. You could even say—a lot better.

I told my mum about all my reflections, and my situation at home—my wife doesn't accept my true self (or as I would call it my "inner split"). That it would be better for me to actually be a woman, as this is the way I feel. And mum accepted that. It probably wasn't easy for her. After that incident I was terrified of what would happen if the paramedics or the

hospital staff saw that I had painted nails, women's clothes, and, God forbid, breasts. I gave away and threw away most of my wardrobe (leaving two pairs of heels—my daughter liked them—and a few skirts). I decided to become a typical straight-laced "Peters,"[8] because otherwise if something like that ever happened to me again, I'd be a laughing stock, a "freak." We even celebrated the farewell to Tosia with cake at work.

However, after a relatively short time, I started dressing like Tosia again. I'm not saying that it's stronger than me, but I said to myself: why should I suppress how I feel and stop wearing the clothes I feel good in? After all, I don't know how much longer I'll live—another post-incident reflection—and I've always behaved the way others wanted me to, because it was the right thing to do. It's high time to start being myself at long last, and not be afraid to show it. After all, I'm not doing anything to spite or hurt anyone (?). Yes, there was a welcome back cake, too. "And the ass stays round the corner"—to quote a classic.[9]

I look forward to the issue of my transCARD[10]—the next milestone in my journey to "being normal."

I've started painting my nails again, but I don't hide my fingers from other people anymore—I wear heels, tunics and skirts at work when I feel like it. I wear eye make-up. But unfortunately, as I mentioned above, my wife doesn't accept me as I am, and I guess it's important what kind of person you are, not what you look like. She doesn't support me in doing anything towards getting my gender corrected. She thinks I lied to her by not telling her who I am. If it were that simple and I'd had the courage and support back then—if only I had a personal demon like Luci from the *Disenchantment* series to tell me more than a decade ago: "do it, do it"—then I wouldn't have got into a relationship with her in the first place.

And I finally want to be myself.

But who am I exactly? I've been reading the literature on gender identity for a long time, and filled questionnaires and psychological tests out

8 In the original, Tosia uses "Piotrowicz," in reference to her given name, Piotr, a "standard" masculine name.

9 *A rzyć pozostaje za winklem*—a quote from Qczaj, a popular vlogger and fitness coach. In early 2020, he caught the attention of the media in Poland by coming out and sharing publicly his experience of being sexually abused as a child.

10 The transCARD is an informal, alternate identity card designed to help transgender people present themselves in official situations, created by the Trans-Fuzja Foundation which has been advocating for trans rights in Poland since 2008.

of curiosity, quizzes on the gender of my brain (it turns out that I have dominant female features). I've been reading various internet forums. I was wondering if this could be some sort of transvestic fetishism? But I don't dress the way I do for sexual reasons. I dress this way because I feel comfortable wearing these clothes. Yes, I like women, but supposedly you shouldn't mix the concept of gender identity with sexual preferences.

Or should I actually give it all a break and drop this damn, what should I call it, "dressing up"? And if there's any chance that my feelings are really real and not just figments of a diseased mind, then is there any point to it—at my age?

My wife told me to talk to a doctor. Because she sees that I'm struggling, and she's struggling as well.

It would just be nice if she accepted me as I am. If it turned out that I could correct my gender I'd be forced to move out (and how could I deal with the separation from my daughter, as we have a great connection—at least thanks to me she knows about wearing make-up and skirts—my wife doesn't like make-up). In my opinion, after 13 years of "observation" I believe that my wife would be perfect as a single person, and what's more: as a typical guy.

To this day she claims that she doesn't know me and doesn't know, for example, what to buy me as a gift.

Or should I "suck it up" while not giving up my "proclivities," and wait for the divorce until my daughter comes of age? Move out of the house as soon as my financial situation allows? (I live with my in-laws).

A tough nut to crack.

So I wrote to the psychologist from Transfuzja.org,[11] asking whether it's possible to deduce what kind of person I am from my confusing letter. Because so far I am, colloquially speaking, "neither fish nor fowl." I don't even know which pronoun I should be using when writing in the first person. Officially it's he/him, Piotr, and unofficially, but actually, it's Tosia—i.e. she/her.

You know what? I found the answer.[12] You'll notice I used the verb in the feminine form in that sentence. It's just my way of sending you a smiling emoji as you're reading it. As for me, after reading the letter from the

11 The address belongs to the website of the Trans-Fuzja Foundation.

12 From this point on, the author switches from masculine to feminine grammatical forms when writing about herself.

psychologist, I walk around and smile almost all the time, resulting in suspicious looks from some family members—remember that scene from the movie *Never Ever!*, when Judyta comes to work after having good sex?[13] Oh, my face looks just like hers, too. My colleagues tell me that I'm pacing around like a madwoman. People should write to a psychologist to say what's on their minds. If you haven't done it yet, what are you waiting for? Piotr waited so many years. Don't be like Piotr. Don't waste a single moment of your life.

I'd like to write to tell you that I'm all fine and normal. Let's just say "normal in my feelings," because the fact that I have a body out of sync with my soul is not "normal" normal. But that kind of thing happens.

After reading the letter from the psychologist, I assume that I'm either transsexual or another thing, called dual-role transvestism. I had to google the definition—I didn't know anything about it before. I know, I know, I can say I'm just a dumb blonde (my wife told me reproachfully that a friend asked her: how's your blonde? Hers, not mine). Let's get back to analysing the letter. Wikipedia says, using a reference from a book by Stanisław Pużyński, *Classification of mental and behavioural disorders in ICD-10. Research diagnostic criteria*, that it is a "behavioural disorder of the gender identity disorders group, characterised by an urge to dress in the clothes of the opposite sex without sexual motivation."

Does this definition include all women who walk around wearing trousers, for example (supposedly a male item of clothing)? My female colleagues prefer to wear trousers and were surprised that I preferred to go to work last Friday in a skirt. Oh, and how about actors in ancient drama? Is there something "wrong" with them too? And by wrong I don't mean the fact that they're already dead.

How can I find a place for myself in either of these two classifications—are there no other friendly terms for "lay people"? People love to classify and name things. Then they feel they "own" them. A bit like naming a demon. If you know its name, then you have dominion over it. That's a fact, sometimes it helps.

Though when all's said and done, why should I think about it? Oops, how Scarlett O'Hara of me. Does a camel—this animal will appear later in this text—wonder if anyone classifies it as a cloven-hoofed mammal? Does it even think about it?

13 *Nigdy w życiu!* (Never Ever!, 2004, dir. Ryszard Zatorski), a Polish romantic comedy.

I doubt it does—as my daughter used to say in her young years. A camel is just being itself. I'll leave that for the actual "onsite" doctor's visit. Things have changed now. Now there's the coronavirus.

Ah yes, living in a skin that's not your own is very difficult. It means suffering almost 24 hours a day (minus bedtime). You look in the mirror and you're sick of yourself. A person who has experienced this, or who has a high level of empathy, is able to understand another similar person. When I look in the mirror from feet to neck—with clothes on—it's not bad, but it gets worse when I look at my head, which visually doesn't match the rest of my body. Female colleagues joke that they will suffer from split egos and will require psychological care. When they glance at me, from below the neck and from behind I look like a woman. That's no longer the case when they look at my head.

The "accident at work" I've described made me realise that my life could end at any moment. Maybe not today, or tomorrow. But I'm not immortal, so why shouldn't I be happy in my life? For what sins should I suffer? Well, unless I wanted to become a saint because of all that suffering. Can you imagine? Saint Antoinette. The one who sacrificed her life to please others—although I don't mind pleasing others—but you shouldn't forget about yourself either.

You may think that my "coming out" was just a snap-snap, please sit down—thank you, I'll wait: that it all came easily. But it has meant, and still means, a lot of nerves, sleepless nights, stress (considering I have a beard). But it's true, I'm getting less and less nervous (a matter of confidence and self-esteem) and I'm cutting my beard down week by week, day by day, and I used to have a sizable one. In fact, I was even an ambassador for a beard cosmetics company and won some beard competitions. You know, beards don't really go with stilettos. But who can say no to beards?

It would be a bit easier without it (they say that make-up works wonders). But for now I'm wearing it: my daughter first asked me to grow a beard because I would look like Santa Claus and she would get more presents. Plus, she says I look terrible without the beard.

There's probably something in that—I could still use more body fat than my constant rate of 7.6%, oof.... As I've mentioned above, I have a slim physique—not least because I'm not keen on food. This is where my wife and I agree: for her sex may as well not exist, for me that thing is food. As I'm interested in my family genealogy (as an aside, apart from the useful genealogy stuff, I'm a West Slav: haha, can you imagine if I looked

like Cleo in the "My Słowanie" video?[14] I'd have the whole world at my feet) I did some genetic research and found out that, among other things, I have an increased resistance to drug addiction, a couple of good longevity genes, and it's more difficult to hypnotise me—alas, bye-bye to the chance of learning about reincarnation. My genetic make-up is that of a long-distance runner.

You know, I want to confess something else, that there's someone who believes that I could make the transition; and my dream would be to go through the whole thing and to function as a woman. And that's regardless of how the relationship with my wife goes—although I'm trying to get it right. Although the fact that I didn't tell her sooner is probably why I'm not "getting it right" anymore. I want to undergo hormone treatment. I'm afraid of surgery—and probably can't afford it. I've only been to the hospital once as a patient and several times as a visitor (for example, the sight of a morgue in the evening isn't pleasant, brrr).

Legal gender correction in Poland, as far as I know, requires an SRS (sex reassignment surgery) and suing your parents. How on earth did someone come up with the idea of suing the parents? This is patently absurd. As if they had any power in choosing the sex of their unborn child. How about calling "the Creator" as a witness? That would be something. But it won't fly in Poland. For the time being I don't think I would be able to sue my mother. She hasn't had it easy in life either, and here I'd be, serving her something like this... Unless she could understand it as a requirement, a matter of formality. "This could work!"—as Tom Hanks said in *Cast Away*.

There's no "problem" with my father for the reasons I mentioned at the beginning, while my stepfather will not be considered. So now I need to find a sexologist who would be willing to diagnose me. I'll look for one who is friendly, professional and as empathetic (I presume) as the psychologist I wrote to. I wonder if there's someone like that in my area?

And how does this relate to visits during the pandemic that has just been officially announced?

Just think, I took the liberty of printing out my letter and the response from the psychologist and showed it to my mother (in fact, my colleagues at work assimilated the content too—I basically exposed myself to those

14 "My Słowianie" (We Slavs)—a pop song by Donatan and Cleo that was chosen to represent Poland at the 2014 Eurovision Contest. In the video—which features numerous female extras dressed in skimpy folk-like clothes and coated in baby oil, several of them seemingly engaged in churning butter—Cleo (the lead singer) wears a modern t-shirt over a miniskirt in a folk-like pattern, her hair in a long plait.

close to me). Living on the edge... I told my wife that I'd had a reply to my letter from the psychologist. It was clear that the message had got through to her. After a few days I asked her if she was curious about the answer, and said that I had printed it out for her to read. In fact, she had been the spark that motivated me to finally get my shit together and write to a psychologist. She replied that she probably knew what it said, because what could a "psychologist" write? Of course he would urge me to "come out." And, she added, I should stop bothering her, because she had other important matters to attend to. Oh, she also said that a psychologist only ever sees one side of the story and that she didn't know what I'd written in my letter anyway. I said: no problem, I'll let you read my letter. Well, that was the end of the conversation—both letters printed out and placed there calmly in the open. It turns out that if she doesn't want to see the problem then the problem doesn't exist.

To put my mind at rest, a few weeks ago I contacted Amoena (a company which manufactures breast prostheses) to ask them to choose the right model and breast size for me. I explained the whys and hows of the situation, and that I'd like to order one for myself. I got a professional and kind reply, which prompted further correspondence and an order for new breasts for Tosia. I will have perfect 80C size breasts (too bad it's not natural—I think I'll order some soy beans in tomato sauce). They're supposed to arrive next week, along with a bra. I'm waiting on pins and needles... (or on stilettos: that's a better term, since I like walking in heels).

I wonder what my path toward correction would look like. What would I need to do first, what steps would I need to take? Who do I go to, possibly later: what kind of tests should I take? What and how do I prepare? Unless my whole lifelong dream goes down the drain after a visit to the sexologist? Although it's all up in the air now with the whole coronavirus situation.

What else could I ask the psychologist? She recommended that I attend a support group. And what does one do in therapy sessions like that? Are they a bit like internet forums? My wife would probably benefit from attending one of the support groups for family and friends—but I'm betting she "won't go for it." I hope that I'm wrong. When a local newspaper published a piece about me and my passion (photography, to be precise: my playful photos with book covers), my wife and mother-in-law didn't speak to me for a few days as a result. Only my father-in-law joyfully walked into the house with a newspaper and triumphantly announced that I was in it. I was on the radio and in the paper again recently for winning the nationwide photo competition in the "Librarian Unlike Any Other" category,

except that they don't listen to the radio, and from what I can see, I think they've stopped reading newspapers too.

I'll see how the relationship with my wife develops—in fact, one could talk about our relationship both at length and briefly. Although sometimes I can see, unfortunately, that talking about it is a waste of time. How many times have I wanted to leave the house and never come back? I have not done so only for the sake of my daughter.

I wonder how to talk to my daughter about these things? Because I paint my nails and ask to be called Tosia, and she doesn't perceive this as something "undesirable"; but how exactly to tell her that I feel bad in my body and that I feel I'm a woman? Might it be so childishly simple as just telling her the truth about how I feel? Although anyone can probably dispute my statement, because how am I supposed to know how "women feel," having a biologically male body? Unless the key term is that "I feel," but then perhaps they would diplomatically send me away to a madhouse. The question of a man and a woman cannot be reduced only to the body, but also to the soul.

What do you think?

By the way, to return to the "path of development," courts in Poland require some kind of sex reassignment surgery before a person can be considered a fully-fledged woman or man. Yes, I admit, that "the regular-sized thing down there, between my legs" obstructs me from wearing tight dresses, unless I tape it. But isn't this a more drastic interference in the body than hormone therapy? What if something goes wrong? I've heard about so many unhappy women who have had their bodies sewn up so badly after childbirth that it scares and saddens them...

It was recently reported that some billionaire underwent penis surgery, admittedly an enlargement, and died as a result. How true do you think it is that after genital corrective surgery, you either have to be extremely sexually active or sleep with something like a strut between your legs? And what about me? Since I'm attracted to women it would probably be more useful to leave the penis, though. But members with a member allowed, haha: courts won't legally recognise me as a woman (I guess this is only in Poland?). They're probably afraid that women will have bigger members than them. After all, we often have "bigger balls" than men. For instance, my work colleagues say that if I feel like a woman I have to go all the way, including SRS. Otherwise they view it as follows: my case is a challenge for a psychotherapist, which will give the psychologist a serious headache

("your pain is better than mine").[15] It'll be seen as *#hotchallenge2020*[16] and may be a reason for the psychologist to change profession. They can't imagine it any other way.

The question of my penis... Am I uninterested in it? Of course I would prefer not to have it, but I'm afraid that something will go wrong, I'm afraid of pain and surgery. There's also the question of finances (insurmountable for me at the moment—and I'm basing this estimate on the costs from a few years back). Can you, for example, go abroad and be legally recognised as a woman in another country without undergoing SRS? Or maybe the fear of pain is like the fear of getting a tattoo. You're afraid of the pain, but you're "excited" about it and so you have it done; and I have several.

Oh well, with or without a member, I still feel like a woman inside, and the legal issues—see the camel question. Didn't I say this key animal would get another mention? Hey look, I just noticed. The camel: a perfect animal for me: cam-*L*,[17] nature's big fail.

These are my reflections, and there are certainly still things I don't know. However, I remain hopeful—and hope supposedly both dies last and is the mother of fools.

Yet, in the end, a mother.

Skoczów, 23 June 2020, Tosia

P.S. It's been a while since I posted. I hope all is well with you. I'm wiser now. You know, I corresponded with the other psychologist from the "Tęczówka" Association. I even met her in person. We talked for over 3 hours. She decided that I was as normal as it gets. She told me that I should visit a sexologist first and that the physician would handle my transition. To get the ball rolling, I have to get an opinion. This sometimes takes six months,

15 "Twój ból jest lepszy niż mój" (Your Pain Is Better than Mine) is the title of a protest song by Kazik Staszewski. The song became extremely well-known in Poland in spring 2020; in the lyrics, Kazik ridiculed the incident of 10 April 2020, during Easter, when Jarosław Kaczyński, leader of the ruling party (PiS), broke the COVID pandemic curfew by travelling in a column of government cars to a cemetery to place flowers on the grave of his parents. The song gained substantial traction, particularly after it came to light that the management of the state-controlled public radio station *Trójka* (Third Channel) manipulated the results of the listeners' vote. In the end, "Twój ból" topped the radio's popular charts on 15 May 2020.

16 #hotchallenge2020—actually #Hot16Challenge—a popular online campaign launched in 2014 by rapper Solar in Poland, in which participating artists were asked to provide a 16-line lyrical performance over a beat of their choice. The campaign was revived in 2020 by Solar and fellow rapper Mata (as #hot16challenge2); in the second edition, the participants included artists as well as public figures (including politicians, such as President Andrzej Duda), and the aim was to collect funds for medical personnel during the pandemic.

although there are some "specialists" who will give an opinion in 15 minutes and prescribe you hormones straight away. The so-called professional ethics. However, I want an opinion issued carefully, given that I don't need hormones "urgently." Yes, they would help me a lot, but I don't want to rush the process—because I don't want to cause myself any harm. As they say, fools rush in where angels fear to tread. The only drawback is that I'd have to travel a long way to find a good sexologist and I'm not very mobile. In addition, the coronavirus is still out there, so it may turn out that the sexologist won't see me in person but just give a consultation over the phone. Personally, I prefer talking face to face. I learned that SRS (sex reassignment surgery) is not required. What's more: it's banned before legal gender correction. In addition, there are to be amended regulations whereby legal gender recognition will not require treatment. All that will be required is an opinion, probably a thorough one, from a doctor. It isn't even necessary to remove that miserable penis, only the testicles because of the possibility of cancer during hormone therapy.

The issue with my wife hasn't changed much. She decided that I was "selfish" and thought only of myself—because I'd spoken to psychologists—and said that she would make an appointment with a psychologist in Bielsko-Biala. I asked what she expected from this appointment. She said she didn't know, and that I didn't "know" either. What if the psychologist tells her that I'm still OK? My wife certainly expects the psychologist to "dissuade" me from my own feelings. Yesterday she reproached me for exuding such sexuality (the way I fix my hair, the way I behave and move). And when I walk around with a smile on my face, she immediately becomes suspicious.

It hasn't been too rosy in Poland ever since the last presidential election. I'm watching as the "witch-hunt" against LGBT+ people continues at an alarming rate. Name-calling, mocking, physical assaults and twisting everything around are becoming the order of the day. And all this with the consent of our current leaders. On top of that, there are suicides among those who are being persecuted, hounded by the "real pro-family Poles." Something is rotten in the state of Denmark. But I still want to finally become myself and live a normal life. Will this be given to me and to others? Because nothing's more beautiful than living in harmony with yourself. Then you feel that you can move mountains. Oh, and I still work at the library. It's been 18 years already.

Skoczów, 5 October 2020

9

ANDRZEJ [My name is Andrzej. I was born in 2001. I'm 19 years old. I've lived in a small town in the south of Poland since I was born. In June 2020, I took my final exams and graduated from high school. For the last few months I've been living in Kraków, where I started university. Currently, I identify as gay, which isn't an easy issue for me.]

Apples with mustard

The title of these memoirs is important to me, and symbolic of my fear caused by my sexual orientation.

We've always lived at the same address in my hometown. Our family, that is: my parents and two older sisters. I'm still very attached to them. When I was younger my parents were often away because of work: we lived in an unfinished house, so they were always trying to fix it up somehow.

Then, when I was about 12, my dad began to go abroad regularly and I would see him even less often. For me, this translated into a larger number of responsibilities at home that were considered "manly." I was never comfortable dealing with technical things, but my family expected me to fill in for my dad. It made me sad, as I felt somehow guilty about my awkwardness.

I've always felt a stronger connection to my mum. As a child, I had none of the interests stereotypically associated with boys (cars, soldiers). I did not share other kids' dreams to become a fireman or an astronaut in the future. I was fascinated by nature, I loved animals and staying outdoors. I played school and other similar games with my sisters, and there was no one our age living nearby. I remember the first situation that I now somehow associate with homosexuality, occurring quite early on—I might have been 5 or 6 years old. My parents, when they were not at home, would leave us with an aunt who lived nearby. One day my uncle was showing us pictures of himself, and I really liked the one of him in the army, standing in a group of shirtless men. In kindergarten I mostly hung out with the girls; I was a well-behaved child, and the other boys were always being told off. At one point I wanted to join the boys, and the teachers told me off for being naughty.

In primary school I joined the scouts, and it had quite an impact on my life. The troop I belonged to consisted mostly of girls. I got along with them right away. I didn't feel comfortable in an all-boys environment. This was also noticed by others, who pointed it out to me.

I preferred to sing, while other boys were fascinated by weapons and the military. I, on the other hand, was a pacifist from a relatively young age. In that environment there was quite a big gulf between things that girls and boys did. After some time and a few talks with the group leaders (who didn't like the fact that I was in female company all the time), I tried to stay longer with the boys, but found it tiring. I felt I didn't belong there, I wasn't amused by their jokes, I didn't like the military way of being. The scouting movement I belonged to was strongly connected to the Church, so we had our own chaplain (he insulted LGBT people all the time on his social media profiles), and people with very conservative views were in the majority. I assimilated these views myself—until around my 16th birthday I could be described as a strongly right-wing individual—and I was also an ardent believer (although I never actually felt the presence of God). Scouting instilled in me a belief in ideals and a desire to help others (this had also always been instilled in me by my mother). The next homosexual situation I remember occurred in sixth grade. While I was browsing the Internet on my phone, I came across gay porn. I don't know why, but I showed it to a friend. In the evening, I received a text message from his father saying that my friend had told him about the stuff that I had shown him and that he would see my teacher tomorrow. I had never been so scared before, I was shaking all over. I couldn't sleep from the stress, and the fear that my parents might find out about what I'd been doing. At night I ate apples with mustard to make my stomach hurt, when that didn't work I pretended to be sick in front of my parents. I managed to skip school that day, but it wasn't enough to calm me down. When I returned to classes, I didn't suffer any consequences from the teachers (I think my friend's father hadn't spoken to anyone after all), but my "friend" managed to spread what he'd seen to the rest of the class and I became the butt of jokes until practically the end of my time there.

I had a "girlfriend" in primary school but I felt nothing towards her, even though we kissed. We were together for a couple of days, although I was somehow repulsed by the idea of being too close to her. It was nice to have a girlfriend, as every boy had one, but the "spark" wasn't there.

I watched some gay porn in middle school, but I didn't think of myself as gay at the time. I thought it would pass. After all, it was at odds with what I believed in, so I guess I preferred to suppress it. I remember when my dad was looking through my phone and asked me about the homosexual pornography he found on it. I thought I was going to collapse in shame and fear, but I kept my cool and lied that it must have been because of some virus. I was very ashamed when, under pressure from my parents, I had

to go to confession and talk about what I'd done. Anyway, as far as I remember, I never confessed to having watched specifically gay porn. I felt intense remorse that I was still doing it, I thought of myself as an evil, dirty person, especially since I had read about "sodomy" as one of the worst sins. I perceived homosexuality as a punishment, I couldn't understand why I had to be the one to suffer, I even thought that I would never love anyone and would remain lonely for the rest of my life. In middle school, I was a fairly typical teenager with right-wing views (while also being homosexual). I was interested in "cursed soldiers"[1] and the Home Army, I was against refugees and LGBT. I think I was a "crypto-gay" at the time, and my views stemmed from a lack of self-acceptance.

The real revolution in my life happened in 2017, 3 years ago. On a trip with friends, we were playing a game of paper chase at night; it was dark and I couldn't see much, so I fell from a height of 5 metres onto some stones. I was very scared, I cried for help, my face was smeared with blood. I couldn't believe it was happening, I could almost physically hear it. It was a while before the terrible pain began, and the sensation that I couldn't feel my leg. My friends came running to help me and called an ambulance. After arriving at the hospital and having an X-ray, I heard that I had fractures in my spine, leg, and skull, as well as joint injuries. For the next few weeks I couldn't sleep because of the extreme pain, although morphine soothed me. In the hospital I began to doubt my former ideals, values and God. I couldn't understand why this had happened to me, as I'd tried to be a good person. My old friends abandoned me; they visited the hospital a couple of times, but only (as I found out later) thanks to my sister. For about 2 months I was dependent on others, and for almost 9 months I didn't leave my house. During that time I began to think about the meaninglessness of the world, about suicide, and my long-suppressed homosexuality. I also thought that since my life could be cut so short, there was no point in pretending to be somebody else. That's when it really dawned on me that I was gay. I felt relieved and I partly accepted it. I also became much more tolerant, because you only live once and you can't just ruin other people's lives because of your own views. I also thought at the time about coming

1 *Żołnierze Wyklęci* (Cursed Soldiers)—a collective name for members of partisan units that continued to fight after World War II (1944–1947), against the new, Communist authorities in Poland. Over the past two decades, Polish governments had engaged in efforts to apotheosise them as victims of Communist violence. The anti-Communist underground tended firmly toward nationalism and anti-Semitism; its units committed murders against Holocaust survivors and those of the Orthodox faith—a fact that the official state politics of memory overlooks, downplays, or justifies with the supposed pro-Communist sympathies of the victimised minorities.

out, but I knew then and know today that my family wouldn't react positively. I think that's largely because of their commitment to religion. My mother, who I'm closest to, used to say in front of me that homosexuality was some kind of disorder and should be treated. It's really hard to live with the thought that the person I love so dearly unknowingly doesn't accept me for who I am. In high school I began to meet other gay men online, at first on forums and living far enough away, because I was afraid of being recognised. At first this was very emotional for me, and I was trembling with excitement. I was also meeting guys on Snapchat. Later on I started using apps like Tinder, but that was very stressful because it was much less anonymous. The acquaintances from web portals never turned into meetings in the real world.

In high school most of the time I had no male object of affection. In the 3rd grade I had my first sexual encounter. It happened with a friend whom I had known for a long time.

I idealised him a lot and couldn't wait to hear from him; when he didn't respond, I was afraid I'd texted something wrong. Little did I know that this was probably what falling in love felt like. If that's what it was, then I had a crush on him for years. I helped him with his problems, and once we hugged, started kissing, and then everything happened in a flash. We did it a few more times, but both he and I felt bad about it; we thought we were doing something wrong. Anyway, even now I think that if anybody else knew, it would turn into a huge scandal in a small town. After a while I stopped texting him back, and didn't want to hang out anymore. It was toxic for both of us, and after every meeting we both felt guilty and promised each other it wouldn't happen again. These days we hardly keep in touch anymore. Other man-to-man relationships were limited to contacts and "intimacy" over the Internet. I only went on a date with a boy I met through Tinder once. We were supposed to meet at a café in my city. I arrived at the agreed time, waited nervously for about an hour, but he didn't show up. When I tried to contact him, I found out that he'd blocked me. I had a hard time getting myself back together after that happened.

It was not until I moved to Kraków that I met another man I felt attracted to, who made me fall in love for the second time. We met by chance at an art gallery: he was interested in a painting by O. Boznańska, me in *Frenzy of Exultation* by Podkowiński, under which we met.[2] We talked about the art

2 Olga Boznańska (1865–1940), Polish post-Impressionist painter, settled in Paris since 1898. *Szał uniesień* (Frenzy of Exultation) by Polish Impressionist painter Władysław Podkowiński (1866–1895) is a controversial work from 1894 believed to be an early exponent

of painting, and it was an amazing experience for me. When I finished my visit, I decided to wait for him. I sensed (I think somehow intuitively) that he was gay too. We started a conversation, but it was awkward because I'm still stressed about meeting a man on anything more than a "just friends" basis. We went to a bar; I couldn't get enough of his beautiful bright eyes, I can still see them. We went for a walk and started spontaneously kissing in a passageway, it was wonderful, we got intimate in the park. It was passionate and very romantic. But he was from central Poland, and only visiting Kraków for the day. Now I regret it a lot, but I didn't even ask him for his name as I didn't want things to get serious. Subconsciously, that's probably what scares me. Without a name, I don't have any real way to look for him. He went back home the same day, and already in my apartment I began to miss him, his face etched in my thoughts. I came back several times to the place where we met, at the weekend and exactly one week later at the same time. I tried to find him through LGBT Facebook groups, through Instagram, but to no avail. I still miss him, though I've almost given up hope of ever meeting him again. I resent myself for not taking care of that relationship—maybe I'd be a happier person now?

I still have suicidal thoughts quite often, and I don't experience joy. I feel that I will never be happy as a gay man in Poland, that even if I find someone, we'll have to remain in hiding. On top of that, there's alcohol, more and more of it, cigarettes, parties, and before that: self-harming. I try to mask my feelings; a friend of mine even told me once that I must have no problems whatsoever because I'm always smiling so much. I've never sought specialised help because I'm ashamed of it and I'm trying (especially after the accident) to be independent and self-reliant. Besides, I don't have money for therapy, and my parents consider psychologists to be charlatans.

I'm hearing more and more horrible news about LGBT issues. When I returned to my hometown and went to church with my mum, just to please her, I heard the priest compare the LGBT to the Bolsheviks, saying that they needed to be fought like the USSR.[3] I wanted to get out of there

of Symbolism. It depicts a naked woman astride a prancing black horse that foams at the mouth.

3 LGBT+ persons—and their social and political causes—have been likened to Bolshevism by incumbent President Andrzej Duda during his reelection campaign in 2020, a sentiment also shared by prominent members of the clergy. In his sermon of 1 August 2020, commemorating the anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, Archbishop of Kraków Marek Jędraszewski stated: "The red plague no longer soils this earth, but a new one has sprung up—a neo-Marxism that seeks to devour our souls, hearts, and minds. No longer red, but rainbow-coloured."

immediately, but mum would have been left on her own. I was very affected by this, especially since a few days earlier a friend of mine had been beaten up just because he had a colourful gym bag. The country I live in terrifies me. I feel that the rising tide against non-heteronormative people will eventually reach me. Widespread, impunity-free hate on the Internet, assaults, direct insults on the street: just because we're not straight and dare to talk about it. I don't understand the hatred. I don't understand how a person could want to hurt me just because I love someone. I wish people would see me as a person first. And judge me not because I'm gay, but because of the kind of person I am to them. I've always tried to be good to others and help if I can.

When I was in Kraków I did a coming out for the first time, to my closest friend. I was afraid of this moment, of her reaction. It took me some time to work up the courage to do it, and finally I told her in English—at a party in a club, when it was just the two of us: "*I'm gay*." I couldn't get these words out in Polish. To my surprise, she took it well and said that she'd already suspected, but was afraid to ask in case she offended me. I did another coming out to my closest friends on a social networking site. I was very stressed. The reactions were good though, and a couple of people even offered me support. I got a message from a gay friend of mine saying it was the best thing he had read that day. It hurts me that I can't be honest in front of my family, that when I do find a boyfriend I won't be able to introduce him to my parents as the person I want a future with. The fact that hardly anyone knows about my orientation is quite problematic. However, I think I'm not quite ready to come out fully yet. I recently realised that one of my female friends expects something more from me, something I can't offer her. I don't want to hurt her, so I try to pretend I don't see it and keep my distance.

I only have contact with non-straight people through the Internet, although I intend to change that in the nearest future. I try to be kind to everyone and not cancel anybody; I often support charity campaigns, because I think that this way I can at least make the world a little bit better. I'm inspired by the title character from my favourite film, *Amelie*. I like listening to socially conscious music, e.g. Maria Peszek or Lao Che, whose lyrics touch upon equality and tolerance. I believe that through mutual kindness and the absence of hostility we can build a new, better world. Lyrics are probably the most important part of a song for me. I currently live in a flat in Kraków, which I share with six roommates. You can't really have any privacy or intimacy there—you can hear far too much through the plaster walls. My flatmates don't know that I'm gay, but I plan to tell

them about it when the subject comes up, so that there won't be any ambiguous situations in the future and so that they know that the smiling boy who often visits me is not a friend but my partner. I don't really look like a stereotypical gay man. In high school I started to curl my hair, which is probably quite unusual, and I've also changed my outfit a little bit to be more elegant, but not too ostentatious. I still hang out with women, and my closest friend Ania (the one I came out to for the first time) recently confessed that she likes girls as well as boys. In "real life" I don't have friends who openly identify as non-heteronormative. I meet people like that on the internet, but now I have more courage to communicate with them on general social networks. It was relatively easy for me to find gay people to meet on Instagram, even one I fancied a lot, but the feeling was unreciprocated. I haven't been there yet, but I'm planning to go to an LGBT club with the friend—actually this was her idea, after I came out. She turned out to be very supportive. I was also helped by a gay friend I met through Instagram; he was the one who encouraged me to describe my experiences here, for which I am immensely grateful.

Looking at my story as a whole allowed me to see my life in a different light and made me realise that the way I am now has been building up for a really long time. I would like to get involved in the fight for LGBT rights, for my rights, so that both myself and my friends, who have often supported me, would have better lives. After my love affair with the right wing, my attitude towards political parties is rather cautious, but when I see an injustice I would like to be able to respond to it in a tangible way. Nowadays I tend to identify with left-wing views. I dream that Poland will finally become a country without hatred, where history is not a wound you scratch, but a thing to examine to make sure it doesn't repeat itself in the future. I hope that in the next few years our country will get back on track as part of Europe. Despite the anxiety I feel because of the continuous hateful attacks from society and the government, I still firmly believe that one day I'll be able to live and love here, without fear.

10

NINA [Cis woman, lesbian, born in 1996 in a small town (less than 50,000 inhabitants) in the Warmia-Mazury Province; she lives in Warsaw.]

Childhood and family

I come from a small town in the north of the country. I was raised to the rhythm of Polish rap and techno music of the 1990s and early 2000s. The home I lived in was in a grey tower block, blue-grey—myself, my two brothers, my mother, and my step-father. Our apartment was ugly, about forty square metres; three small rooms, a tiny bathroom, and a narrow kitchen. Polish socialist style: wood panelling, wall units in every room, fitted carpet, green kitchen and linoleum, cast-iron bathtub, and a broken gas water heater. General squalor, as ever with these old apartments. Oh, and zero privacy, everyone getting in everybody else's way, thin walls, and neither I, nor my mum and stepdad had normal doors to our rooms—just the folding type. The bathroom door had to stay open to avoid gas poisoning. There were no doors at all to the kitchen. The only room that afforded any privacy at all belonged to my brothers, who would move out for good when I was finishing middle school.

One of the brothers is nine years my senior, the other ten. For the most part, my mother had no control over them. They often took things out of the apartment and sold them. They were pretty clever about it, only taking the objects whose absence wasn't easily noticed, like the golden medallion I got for my communion, their own Walkmans, cables, chargers, old mobile phones—things that spent their days deep inside the wardrobe. All to earn the respect of the street people, to show off brand clothes we couldn't afford. They also stole money from my mother and step-father; sometimes, they took cash from my piggy bank. They often ran away to their father, partied a lot, came home drunk. And that's when most of the fights began. Sometimes, the police came. When my eldest brother returned drunk, he jumped on my mother and step-father. The other brother was a silly drunk—when got his fill, all he did was puke on our neighbours' windows; occasionally, he'd get hit in the face while he was out on the town. Meanwhile, I kept calm and well-behaved to save my mum the added stress. I was never out of line, always back home on time, observing all the rules and instructions, never going out without permission. I didn't talk about my fears so as not to make my mother nervous. I learned to let off steam on my own and discuss my problems with my girlfriends. My family was never any kind of support for me.

My father lived in the country with his wife—they had an agrotourism place. He sometimes took me in, until he didn't; I can't say why. I still don't have any contact with him. My mother began her relationship with my step-father before I was born, while she was pregnant. He smuggled cigarettes from Russia and worked doing renovations. He was an alcoholic, but at least he didn't beat anyone, which was an improvement on my mum's ex-husband and the father of my brothers. And he worked. I didn't like my step-father; my brothers actively hated him. He was nasty, narcissistic, and domineering, which none of us liked. He and my brothers often hurled abuse at one another. In time, I, too, began to curse him to his face. I may not have liked him, but I did sometimes cover for him to my mother when he got drunk—which he did daily. He wasn't particularly sly about it, either; he must have thought I was stupid and couldn't see what was going on. Once, he took me to a country house, where he had a drinking session with a neighbour. Afterwards, completely plastered, he got behind the wheel and zig-zagged across the road all the way home. We ended up in a ditch. I only told mother as an adult.

We were always strapped for cash, even though my mum had a pretty high-level job for small-town standards—she was a director at the Central Statistical Office (GUS). However, her branch was foreclosed in the early 2000s and she was demoted to a pollster. She drove around, visiting farmers and asking them questions. She also collected data. All that for the minimum wage; much of it went for petrol because there was no reimbursement. Together with my step-father, she opened a flower shop, though they had no experience of running a business or even any clue about flowers. The shop didn't earn anything, but cost more and more. In the end, they wound up the firm. My step-father began to suffer from diabetes and stopped going to work. He drank and smoked more and more, and often ended up in hospital. Eventually, his pancreas gave in; there were also various complications due to alcohol abuse. We needed money. Mum travelled to Germany every few months to care for the elderly—she still does it today. When she was abroad, I stayed back home with my step--father and brothers. The first time she went was when I was about twelve, around the time my biological father severed ties with me without any hint of an explanation. So I was abandoned by my two closest relatives.

My mum wrote letters from Germany; at the time, international calls cost a lot of money. I still have one of the letters; in it, she tasked me with holding the fort, broadly speaking. I was to watch over the guys, avoid quarrels, and walk our dog, Brenda. In my mother's eyes, I was the only sensible person in our home and it fell upon me to take over her duties.

At the time I was still in primary school. I remember how I struggled with the burden she left me with. I wanted to fulfil her expectations, but neither of my housemates respected me. When my brothers were home, they listened to rap or disco polo—ever since I remember. They played Peja, WWO, Toples[1] at full volume; the entire block knew that we *represented poverty*, that you should *watch how you dance cause you'll slip on life's floor*, but that *we'll push through*, and that *no one does it like the girl next door*. But first and foremost, *ACAB*.[2] If I asked them to turn it down, they ran me out of the room. Our step-dad didn't care, so I was left completely alone.

Coming home from school was a painful experience. I really didn't want to be there—I think the only thing that made me come back was that I needed to look after the dog. Every time, I prayed that my step-dad would be sober, that there would be food, that I would be able to do my homework, that he would let me in if I didn't have the keys. My brothers wandered about in the courtyard and came back in the evening, if at all. Often I was locked out and had to search for him in town. And all the time, I kept worrying that the dog needed to be walked, that my poor dog was locked in or, worse, out with him. I couldn't study with all this going on, so my grade average in primary school was bad and I often came to class unprepared. My mum was the only one who'd helped me with the homework, but now she was gone.

We didn't talk about problems at home. Everything was swept under the carpet. There was no one I could ask inconvenient questions; sex was taboo in my home. My only source were the pirated pornographic films my step-father kept in a drawer or the rap songs played by my brothers. One can easily guess what I thought about those things back then. Women were bitches that men could do as they pleased with. When my mum came back, I often heard her having sex with my step-father. If I told them the following day that I'd heard them and couldn't sleep, my step-father would always shoot back: "You shouldn't snoop." Mother was silent. She was always neutral in everything and rarely had an opinion. She was reluctant to talk to me about stuff. I can't recall us ever having any conversations about periods or the first time.

1 Peja (b. 1976) is a Polish rap singer from Poznań who gained prominence in the late 1990s with his group Slums Attack. WWO (orig. *W Witrynach Odbicia*, Shop Window Reflections) is a Warsaw-based hip-hop band that enjoyed its heyday in the 2000s. Toples—a Białystok-based band performing *disco polo* (a brand of Europop developed in Poland in the 1980s), active throughout the 2000s.

2 The most common Polish equivalent for All Cops Are Bastards—represented by the acronym *HWDP* (*Huj* [sic] *W Dupę Policji*, lit. Fuck the Cops in the Ass)—is distinguished by its reference to sexual violation (with a potentially homophobic undertone).

Hole

It took about five minutes on foot to get from primary school to home. You just crossed Moniuszki Street, passed by the dumpster, and my tower block loomed to the right—back then still blue-grey, later pastel orange with yellow stripes. My brother had just bought a pirated copy of *The Sims* from a friend for twenty zlotys, so I decided to invite a girlfriend from my class home. We wanted to play it together. As soon as classes ended, we quickly ran to my home. We crossed the street, passed the dumpster, and were out of breath by the time we reached the building door. In those days, there was still no intercom. We ran up to the first floor. Of course I hadn't taken the keys, so we stood at the door for a bit. My step-father opened it, wearing only underpants and a t-shirt. A bag of yellow fluid hung from under the t-shirt. He had a large, deep hole the bag was pinned to. He stank of sweat and alcohol, but he always smelled like that. The whole apartment reeked of Russian cigarettes. He smoked red viceroys, one hanging on his lip. He drew on it: "Hi, girls." He coughed and scratched his backside. We entered the dim hallway. My step-father went to the toilet without closing the door, as usual. As a child, I was never sure if he was drunk or if it was the illness that made him so sluggish. He had trouble standing up, tottered about, and he was always so unpleasantly direct. He relieved himself with the doors open, farting and belching loudly; he smoked wherever he liked, put his hand in his underpants in front of people to adjust himself. No one ever told him not to. My friend had met him before, so she just laughed when she saw him sit on the toilet and pick up a newspaper. How should she have reacted? We were only little girls. We passed through the day room, which doubled as my mother and step-father's bedroom, then went into my room and closed the folding door. Loud groans resounded from beyond the wall. I turned on *The Sims*. Our computer was well worn, so a good thirty minutes would pass before everything loaded up. As we waited, we constantly heard my step-father's movements. He meandered through the apartment, his cheapo slippers scraping across shoddy panels. He always scraped. Eventually, the scraping ceased, the springs of the sofa creaked, and my step-father sighed. He didn't scold us, so we could go on playing. I remember being afraid—that he would come and yell at us that we were being too loud, or demand that my friend leave. We got caught up in the game, created a Sim family, put in "motherlode" and equipped them with a million Simoleons. As we debated what colour curtains to get for the dining room, he hissed: "Nina, come here." I replied: "Just a minute." I didn't want to, I really didn't want to go. "Nina!" Again, I shouted: "Just give me a moment." He bellowed: "Fuck!" so loud we jumped in our seats.

I pushed the folding doors a little and looked out. He was lying on the sofa and picking at the hole in his belly. The bag with the yellow-orange substance was lying next to him, on the sheet. Out of the hole came blood mixed with something yellow. The hole was so deep I wasn't sure where it reached. My eyes only registered a black abyss. He'd put some gauze on it, but it was already completely soiled. His hand was shaking. I felt queasy. "Tell your friend to go." My friend looked at me, stood up from the seat and went into the day room. She saw my step-father, but tried to look away, like I did. I led her to the door. I remember the shame, horrible shame, and the helplessness. After that, I never invited anyone over again.

Dreams

Ever since I can remember, I wanted to be a singer because I really loved to sing. I watched the Viva channel in Polish and German, dreaming of my future career. My favourite artists were P!nk and Kelly Clarkson; I admired the girls from Pussycat Dolls. I wrote my own lyrics to popular tunes and sang them to my mother. She always said I sang out of tune and had no talent. She laughed at me then and still does now when I sing to myself. I also wished to become a piano player. When I was only a few years old, Mum took me to a music school in our town, but they didn't take me in. I couldn't get over the fact that no one gave me a chance for the longest time. I was only a little kid, for crying out loud!

In primary school, I wanted to join the choir. The music teacher acted as the recruiter. During our first lesson, she divided us into three-person groups and had us sing the national anthem. She didn't choose me. I was very sad because I wanted it so much. Until the last year of school, I looked on with envy at the members of our school choir. They wore red togas with a golden stripe, performed at every school ceremony, and won competitions. I loved to hear them sing, whatever the tune. It always moved me. It wasn't until middle school that I could finally sign up to join the choir, but the low self-esteem that I'd been living with for so many years made me quit before long. I was ashamed to sing, and the shame has stayed with me to this day. I only sing when I'm with my girlfriend or when alone. Music plays a major role in my life—I get very emotional when listening to classical or film music. I listen to Vivaldi, Tchaikovsky, and Chopin with a lump in my throat and tears in my eyes. I love Ludovico Einaudi, Philip Glass, and Hans Zimmer. I appreciate the balladry of Marek Dyjak, Mirosław Czyżykiewicz, Ewa Demarczyk, and Edyta Geppert. I listen to Polish rap—an inheritance from my brothers: WWO, Hemp gru, Peja Slums Attack, Taco Hemingway. I dance to ABBA,

Boney M., Britney Spears, and Beyoncé. I get my biggest kick out of music from the 1990s, but above all, I love Polish alternative music: Hey, Maanam, Bajm (the oldies), Mira Kubasińska, Kult, Varius Manx. That's the sound that I love the most.

As a middle schooler, when I already knew I would never become a singer, I wanted to be an actor. This seemed more likely to pan out: not all actresses can sing! Obviously, I got no support from my family. No one thought acting was work. Grandpa advised me to stop fantasising and pursue an engineering degree; Grandma suggested forestry or veterinary medicine. My mother had no opinion—what else; she let me decide. What they all wanted, though, was for me to get an education, because education leads to jobs. Out of spite, I chose a high school with an arts and theatre profile. It soon transpired that I wasn't a great actor, either—I spoke too softly and inarticulately. In plays, I was always cast in bit parts. I lacked the charisma, but as long as I was on stage, I played as best I could. So there was another dream I would never fulfil.

Middle school

Because of my home situation, my grades in primary school were poor. They improved in middle school, but I was still a bog average student. I think I didn't even know how to learn. Everything bored me, I was quick to lose focus. Most classes seemed useless to me in real life, knowledge from books pointless to acquire. I didn't really care about the grades, but I hid all the Fs from Mum. Sometimes I played truant from school or wrote my own excuse notes.

I always wanted to stand out from the crowd, so I adopted a fairly original dress style for a smalltown girl. My outfits were garish, all my trousers had holes. My classmates generally liked me, but my teachers didn't. My class was all girls; I had several friends. Middle school was also the time when I discovered my sexuality. At first I pursued boys, like my friends did, but then something switched in me. The boys were completely uninterested in me, I couldn't make any connection with them; so I quickly stopped caring about them. I didn't like how unpleasant they were, they seemed despicable to me. After all, I had girlfriends who were very pretty who I could talk with easily. Besides, girls didn't stink, didn't pick their noses, and didn't laugh at every idiotic thing. At the time, I wondered what use I could have for a boyfriend if I had so many girlfriends.

There was one girl in my class that I really liked to spend time with. She was very open and sociable, had good grades and a nice voice—everybody was drawn to her. Wiktoria belonged to a group of girls who had

better grades and she spent most of her time during breaks with them. I sometimes talked with her; she made me a bit shy. At first, I didn't realise how fascinated I was with her. I think it dawned on me when she sat with me during biology. I was alone and she joined me. The class was taught by a stern disciplinarian who had very little patience for the students. It was during that particular class that she descended into some kind of mad fury. She suddenly howled for no apparent reason and Wiktoria jumped in her seat, grabbed me by the thigh and laughed out loud. I felt something—like a current passing through my whole body. I think I understood then that something was wrong. I began to think about her more, until she just moved into my head for good. I spent more and more time with her and the group of "superior students." Wiktoria even invited me to a New Year's Eve party at her place. I don't think anyone knew what I felt for her—I suppose I hid it pretty well. Of course it was all for nothing, but after that fascination I only had eyes for girls and completely forgot about boys.

When I was in second grade, a new cohort of students arrived. I had more self-assurance in front of people. The next girl that caught my eye was from the year below. I chatted with her after school, sharing links to interesting websites and to the music we liked. I don't think she was a lesbian, but this contact was all I needed—the rest I filled out with my imagination. She wasn't the only one I liked; I chatted and talked with other girls at school, but I never hit on any of them. I lived more in my dreams, watching the available films and series about lesbians. On pirate sites, you could find *The L Word* in English. This series provided me with some basic insight into the lives of gay people. Every episode gave me this weird, positive hit. I walked taller, more self-assured, and sometimes even felt proud of being different. I went for long walks with my dog and dreamed about living in Los Angeles, among my gay friends. Leisha Hailey, who played Alice Pieszecki, was my mentor—I identified with her and promised myself that I would become like her some day. The more I watched and read, the more I convinced myself that I was actually a lesbian. It was at that time that I began to admire Lady Gaga, who claimed to be bisexual. I also listened to Michael Jackson—I was moved by his singing, oh, and those lyrics! (Yeah, I know he was a paedophile, but his music was beautiful.) I remember I had a diary back then, and I think it helped me put my thoughts in order and arrive at an answer as to what was going on with me. These writings allowed me to recognise many things—it was really helpful. Of course, I never told anyone I was a lesbian. I knew I was too young to know for sure, so I preferred to keep it to myself.

I often thought of myself as a stranger, nonconforming, and sometimes even exceptional. In a way I was happy to be a homosexual. That marked me out in a way from all those other people in my town. At the same time I felt more and more alienated. In my thoughts I led another life, recording in my diary a reality that never materialised.

Platonic love

It was cold, the time of retreats or advent (I'm no good with these church things). I was preparing for my confirmation so I had to attend masses at 6am on Tuesdays and Thursdays to collect stamps. I didn't want to be confirmed—by then, I already knew that Holy Daddy, Jesus, and blabbing about your "sins" at a confessional to an old White fart wasn't for me, but mother kept nagging: "What will people say, it's unbecoming, you have to go because everybody's going." So I woke up before 6am and marched to the church, the one they called Geordie or Big John. After the mass, I went straight to school and made it to the cloakroom by 7:10am. What I usually did was take out a book and read until Elwira showed up—which she did soon afterwards, around 7:20. She was a year younger than me and had Gypsy looks—bright eyes, dark skin and long, black, shoulder-length hair. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, us two were the only ones in the cloakroom that early. For weeks, we spent this time in silence. I'd wanted to talk to her many times, but I never had the courage. On one of those days, she spoke to me: "Hi"; I replied "hey" in a quiet and shaky voice, and my heart jumped into my throat. She sat across from me, took out a book and put huge blue-yellow headphones on. I put all my energies into pretending to read. I kept my reactions in check, but I still felt she must see how frantic I'd become. I raised my eyes and looked at her, taking care not to be caught. It felt like peeping—like something improper, forbidden. I gazed at her for a few seconds, my heart beating like crazy. A heat came over me; I would bet my life that I got red as a lobster. Seconds later, I turned my head down; I thought I would die if I looked at her any longer—like I would explode, my pounding heart jumping onto the floor. I got a little calmer—"easy, easy, breathe in, breathe out"—and then looked at her again. This time, she caught me, those eyes of hers looking straight into mine; she smiled, took off the headphones, and asked: "What are you reading?" I almost wet myself. A shiver passed through me. My stomach began to turn like a boiling volcano. The lava slowly spilled into every crevice of my body. The wave reached my face, flooded the ears. My palms were so sweaty I could hardly hold the book. My feet begged to be relieved of the boots, they were soaking wet. My tongue went out of service—a mental

diarrhoea. "Jesus Christ, what am I reading?! Why is she asking? I must look horrible. Why did I gawp at her? What am I supposed to say? Does she like me? Can she see how I am? Why is she looking like this? Her eyes are so beautiful." I smiled, swallowed, and lifted the book to let her read the title. "Oh, you're reading *Pow-low Caw-ellow*, is it good?" Back in middle school, there was no shame in that. In fact, I didn't understand a thing from those books of his, but that didn't prevent me from saying "Yeah, very good, so philosophical." I shook off the initial shock and kept talking with Elwira until the first bell, all giddiness. Afterwards, we took to chatting and meeting during breaks. I never told her I "liked" her, never met her outside of school—I was afraid. What if she learned I was a lesbian? She would probably cut off all contact with me, wouldn't talk to me anymore. Rejection was something I wanted to avoid at all costs.

Moving out from home and high school days

I decided to move out of my hometown early. The high school I went to was already in Warsaw—as far as I know, Grandpa paid for my upkeep, and then there was also alimony from my father. I chose the school and the dormitory myself. No one showed much interest in the quality of the school and the conditions I would live in. The grown-ups had their own problems. I was accepted into a theatre class in a very average school in the Wola district, and the staff of the dormitory I lived in didn't really care about its inhabitants.

In this big city, I was free—literally. Free from mother's care, free from responsibilities, no more problem home and narrow-minded smalltown folk. I could spread my wings. Sadly, I quickly lost balance. No one at the dormitory checked where we went—all you had to do was put your name in a register: reason for leaving, time of return. If I wanted to return later, I would just ask for a pass. Everyone got one, just like that. During weekends, there was just one caretaker in the whole building because the kids always went back home, so there were fewer of us to look after. I almost always stayed behind at the dormitory. The caretaker did his round at about 9pm; after that, I would sometimes sneak out for the rest of the night.

During first grade, I started smoking. I smoked flavoured black devils—they were rather pricey and I had limited funds. So my small cache quickly ran out and I ended up with just toast and Chinese soup for dinner at weekends. I occasionally went to the Auchan supermarket and ate buns there. There's no use hiding it, I had serious issues with money because I simply didn't know how to save and manage my budget.

As much as Warsaw made me feel free, money became a mental obstacle. I couldn't afford brand clothes—everything I wore I got from someone else or bought at thrift stores. My teeth were crooked, my jaw protruded. I was already anxious about my appearance, but the people here noticed my imperfections more often. They called me "chinny," "crooked mug," "big jaw," because I had an underbite. It was my biggest complex. I wanted to straighten out my teeth, visit a hairdresser, buy new clothes, to make people finally accept me. I wanted to be able to afford all that. To make up a bit for the inadequacies of my appearance and draw attention away from my imperfections, I experimented with my style. I often bleached my hair, and my friends dyed it various colours using turpentine. Pink, blue, violet. Though short on cash, I did my best to look eccentric. I wore fake fur and Doc Martens shoes, glasses in big, thick rims. I had a pierced lip—a friend did that for me in a lavatory at school for 20 zlotys. Luckily, it didn't stay there for long.

In high school, my eyes were still set on girls, but I wasn't even sure I was one hundred percent lesbian. There's something to that: when you're straight you don't need to check yourself, but if you're something else, you need to verify it. I often thought it might be just a phase—maybe I only think I'm a lesbian? Maybe I just needed to meet the right boy? Luckily, people in Warsaw were very tolerant and open-minded. Many were enthusiastic when I declared I was bisexual. However, I could not bring myself to admit to anyone, perhaps even myself, that I was a lesbian. It was shameful, I felt like I wasn't entirely normal. I tried to date girls—I met them through the Internet. I used sites like Badoo.pl, Kobietykobietom.pl, and Innastrona.pl (now known as Queer.pl), but my search often ended in failure. It felt better to follow around girls from school. There were a lot of unhappy infatuations. I lacked self-assurance in front of other people, got anxious in face-to-face interactions. When a girl caught my eye, I first tried to find her on the Internet and start a relationship online. That's how I found Kasia. She was bisexual, and I think she even liked me, but I was very nervous about taking the initiative. Kasia wound up with a guy, and I continued my search. I didn't show warmth in relationships, acting stiff. Only in the evenings did I drift off to fantasy land. Suffering and melancholy felt like home. I liked to live in fantasies—inside my head was a cosy getaway from the real world.

Moving to another city meant losing most of my friends, but I retained contact with a friend I'd known since primary school. We both dreamt of being rich. She came up with a silly idea that I quickly picked up on—back then, it seemed like a wonderful way to earn money. Sell your virginity.

The price? Ten thousand zlotys. *Watch how you dance cause you'll slip on life's floor*.

Sex never figured as a major thing for me—it wasn't connected with love, respect, or intimacy. I did talk about these things with my girlfriends, but it was all reduced to pleasure, the size of the penis, the fear of pregnancy. To me, sex was bestial, even repulsive, so virginity didn't seem like such a treasure. If I could lose it and get money for it, why shouldn't I? I wrote an ad and put it out on Gumtree.pl. Today, ads like these are mostly blocked, but a few years back, there were plenty of such offers out there. I remember writing openly that I wanted to sell my virginity and for how much. Some boys responded and poked fun at me, but grown men showed up, too. They negotiated the price, asked for my photographs, sent photos of their penises. I don't recall ever stating my age, but I was fifteen at the time—it was early days of high school. In the end, one guy wrote back and agreed to pay the ten thousand, sent me his pics. I think his name was Zbyszek, he was about forty, bald, stocky. We exchanged messages for a few days and agreed that he would pick me up at the Wola Park shopping mall. I told my roommate about this—she didn't stop me. I went. He drove up in a white Mercedes. First we agreed to do it in a hotel, but at the last minute he changed his mind and drove me back to his place. I have no idea where he lived; I don't remember the way, what we talked about, and what neighbourhood he took me to. I only remember it was a gated community with an underground garage. His apartment was very small: he only had one room, a kitchen, and a bathroom. He gave me something to drink and told me to sit on the couch. I was terrified, petrified with fear. I know he showed me a wad of cash, the ten thousand. I already knew he wasn't going to give it to me, but I was too afraid to run away. He undressed me and threw me onto the bed. Then he took his own clothes off, didn't even wear a condom. The pain was so strong I shouted and cried. I was conscious of everything that happened, but couldn't move, extricate myself. He covered my mouth with his hand and told me to be quiet. I can't say how long it took—maybe half an hour. Afterwards, he drove me to the parking lot by the shopping mall, handed me three hundred zlotys and said I wasn't a virgin. I remember I tried to reason with him, but he just pushed me out of the car and drove off. I felt like garbage, I never felt so humiliated. I was afraid he'd got me pregnant or given me a venereal disease. Luckily there was nothing of the sort, though I put off getting an HIV test for a very long time. When I recounted the events to my closer friends, they laughed. Some passed the story around. That made me lose all trust in people. My mother still knows nothing about it. For many years,

I blamed myself for what happened, I couldn't believe I was that stupid. I took all responsibility on myself.

As I graduated to the second grade, I lost my place in the dormitory—they were changing to an all-male setup. So, I had to look for a place to stay. I spent the first half of the year at a dormitory in the Praga Południe district, by the Wiatraczna Roundabout. This place was nothing like the other one. There was rigorous strictness; you had to maintain pure cleanliness inside the rooms—the caretakers even checked for dust under the beds. That's where I met my friend Natalia. She was my roommate. We spent nights on long, heavy conversations about childhood and events from our lives. We slept it off between dinner and supper. Though I liked Natalia so much it's hard to describe, I felt stifled by the place. I hated being ordered about—I wasn't used to this level of control. You couldn't even go out for parties and every infraction was relayed to my mother. Besides, our other roommate got on my nerves. After six months, I rented half a room in a dilapidated apartment in Wola. Initially, I shared it with a classmate, then Natalia moved in. I was seventeen at the time. Denied access to parties before, in a separate apartment I could do as I pleased. I began to treat my own body with the utmost spite. I went out with men—I don't know if I sought to gain self-respect or debase myself even further. Of course, I met them on a social basis, I didn't become a prostitute. I sometimes put myself in risky situations because I mostly met them on the Internet, and often got into their cars. These were isolated dates that included having sex. But I quickly gave up on these meetings. There was no attraction, no pleasure for me in them. My fantasies never involved men. I thought constantly about girls.

In the meantime, before I came of age, I started working in a restaurant. The boss told me clearly that I was of no use to him as a waitress and he assigned me to dishwashing. The work wasn't pleasant, but preferable to handing out flyers. The added income improved my financial situation a bit. Besides, my step-father died around the same time, so my mother also had more cash. This meant she could finance my orthodontic treatment and preparations for orthognathic surgery. During the second grade of high school I was fitted with fixed braces, which helped improve my self-esteem. Thus began the long and arduous road to curing my prognathism, which reached an end only during my third year at university. The straighter my teeth became, the more I went out on dates with girls. It may seem silly, but my teeth were such a major source of anxiety for me that the very fact of having braces boosted my self-esteem as much as recent temperature increases in Siberia. I gathered pace, writing to many girls

at once—and I could write like no one else. I always strove to be as non-banal as I could; my first messages were exhaustingly long, but almost always drew a positive response. I loved to receive responses of similar length. Today, I think those messages were how I really was. I wasn't ashamed to write what I thought—I was authentic and charismatic. On dates, I also tried to be like that but didn't always manage to, you know how it is. I spent weekends in gay clubs. In the evenings, I imagined being in a relationship while snuggling against a pillow.

The day after

I woke up, but couldn't muster the strength to get up. I didn't even think of going to school. The day before, I'd become a whore, a bitch, a prostitute. I took money for sex, for my virginity. Three hundred zlotys. What was I supposed to do with the money? I felt like throwing it in the bin, giving it away, losing it as fast as I could. Myself I also wanted to be rid of; I felt like garbage. My self-esteem shrunk to the size of a peanut, and my hatred of myself reached an apex. I looked around the room; my roommates were already gone. Back then, I had no smartphone, just a Nokia 6300 without Internet. I took out my old laptop and went to Facebook. The first post I saw in my feed: "Kasia changed her status to 'in a relationship' with ...."I cracked and started bawling like a little child. "I can't take it anymore, I'm not going to make it in this world." Kasia was a friend from school. I had been pursuing her for some weeks, I really liked her. To impress her, I took to listening to Marylin Manson—heavy, dark music that still gives me goosebumps. Kasia once invited me over when her parents were out. I rode on the 171 bus, my heart pounding with a joy I can't even begin to describe. That day easily figures among the best in my life. When I entered her apartment, my joy reached an absolute summit. I had been dreaming of this moment so many times, but I never expected it to become a reality. We shared a beer and talked about stuff. She played with her long, fair hair and looked in my eyes while talking about concerts and card reading; she touched me a few times. I almost couldn't hear her, couldn't focus, I was so excited. I sat there for something like two hours. I embraced her before leaving—didn't have the courage to kiss her. I walked out all elated, thinking things were going somewhere. In my dreams, we were already together. We continued to write to one another and talk during breaks, but she never invited me anywhere again. It turned out Kasia wasn't particularly patient and quickly began to lose interest. The day she changed her relationship status on Facebook, it felt like being hit in the face. That was the first time my heart was broken, even though we

weren't even together. Ha! I hadn't even touched her or kissed her. At that moment, my world caved in. My internal voice hissed hatefully into my ears: "No wonder she went for a guy. You're ugly, worthless, and a whore to boot. Who would be with a whore?"

Student life in Katowice

After graduation, I began to date a girl my senior by a few years. We found each other on the Internet. We traded wordy messages for a few months, and then began to meet, initially as just friends. I made awkward attempts at flirting with her, trying as hard as I could to leave the friend-zone we were locked in. This was my first attempt at picking anyone up, and it worked. She was the first girl I slept with. The sex wasn't very good and I quickly began to lose interest, so when someone more interesting showed up on the horizon, I immediately broke up with her. Ewelina was another Internet friend—she came from Silesia. I was living in Warsaw, but nothing really held me there; I could study anywhere. As I've already mentioned, I was an average student, and my high school exam results were middling too. My choices were limited, but I also had no idea what I was supposed to do in life. There was no university I particularly wanted to study at. I submitted my papers in Katowice because they had a programme I liked, and it was also where Ewelina lived. I was admitted to cognitive linguistics as well as philosophical counselling and coaching. To my chagrin, I chose the latter.

In July, I went to Katowice on a scouting mission. The purpose was to see an apartment and find my way around the city. I'd never been there before; I thought it was some backwater where everyone walked about wearing coal dust all over their faces. Ewelina picked me up from the train station. I fell in love at first sight—with her, and with Katowice. She led me to my future apartment, which turned out to be across the street from her place. The week was the most beautiful I'd ever spent in my life. Ewelina guided me around Katowice, showing me the best places. We even went to the mountains. She had every day planned—I couldn't believe someone would go to such lengths for me. It felt like paradise, just indescribable. I came back to my hometown with a heavy heart. I missed her so much. We couldn't see each other the whole of August because she was travelling.

It was all settled: I'd found the girl of my dreams; the moment came for me to out myself to my mother. She reacted in stellar fashion: she said she loved me whatever happened. There was no need to come out to the rest of the family. By that time, my step-father was already dead; I have

no contact with my brothers; and more distant relatives heard about me from my mother. I think she told everyone she knew. All her friends accepted it as something natural. My grandparents also know and treat it the same way. That was one area where I got a lot of support, though I probably should rather say they treated it as something normal. After all, that's what it's about—for it to be treated as something normal. I don't need to be accepted, just like straight people don't need to be accepted. As a rule, everyone should be OK with what you are. It's just so lame that gay people are even expected to say out loud that they're gay—that we call it a coming out, leaving the closet. To me, the name itself suggests that having a different sexual orientation is abnormal. Gay people stay locked in their closets until this grand event, the coming out, while straight people can roam free from the start. I expected my relatives to react neutrally because none of them ever expressed any negative sentiments about gays, as far as they said anything about them. I know that many people in the LGBT+ community did not enjoy this level of acceptance.

My mother began to go abroad more often and could no longer care for our dog, so in September, I took our nine-year-old girl and brought her to Silesia. Thus began my first love story. I thought I'd found the love of my life, that we would be together forever. The feeling was indescribable. I couldn't believe someone this pretty and smart could ever love me. I presented Ewelina to my mother and grandparents. She, in turn, introduced me to her sisters, and I immediately struck up a friendship with them.

We spent most of our time in bed, talking about everyday things. I missed philosophical discussions and more serious talk, but I didn't think about that back then. We said we loved one another two months after our first meeting; by the time the fourth month had passed, she'd broken up with me. I couldn't believe it. I wasn't who she thought I was. Meanwhile, she was all perfection to me. My hope for love departed together with Ewelina. I cried about her for two years, remained alone for almost three. I shaved my head. I didn't want to be in a relationship or meet anybody. In Katowice, Ewelina was the only person I really knew; when we parted, I was left alone. I remember I was so lost I even tried turning to God, without much conviction. Ewelina frequented a Dominican church[3] and took me there once for mass when we were together. It didn't look like a regular church—the sermons were very empathetic, the choir sang well, there was none of that climate of martyrdom and

3 In Poland, the Dominican Friars are relatively popular among students and are often perceived as more liberal and open-minded than other Catholic orders.

unhappiness. After our separation, I kept going there fairly regularly for a few weeks, and even confessed, which also didn't go the way I was used to. I confessed to having sold my virginity. I remember crying upon receiving communion for the first time since God knows when. Frankly, I went there for Ewelina more than I did for God. I grabbed every chance to catch a glimpse of her. At one point Ewelina stopped coming to mass, and that put an end to my church-going experience.

During my first year in Katowice, I lived with a girl I knew who was a mythomaniac. She told ungodly fabrications about me to other students. She invented illnesses and faked some weird seizures when I didn't give her enough attention. In the end she took her stuff and went off, leaving me with a two-room apartment to pay for. I was already in a state where I needed help ASAP. I logged onto my old Queer.pl account and began to look for friends. That's how I met Pola, and then Kola, who brought me back from the brink of a breakdown. Of course I had friends at university, but our conversations focussed on intrigues and gossip about who slept with whom. There was a constant search for the next big sensation. That was no place for me to open up—these people lived off gossip and I didn't trust them.

When my flatmate left, I began to have serious issues with the apartment because the estate agent was playing some dirty tricks. I couldn't leave; my deposit dissolved when my flatmate left. When the new girl moved in, I had to repay my deposit. The costs were out of this world. I had rented an apartment in Warsaw and never paid as much for utilities. At that point, my mother began to travel for work to Switzerland and got better pay, but I didn't want to put more stress on her and take more of her money than was strictly necessary. I believed the apartment debacle was all my fault because I was the one who chose it. To take some weight off of my mother's back, I took on a dishwashing job at a club. I moonlighted on weekends, sometimes for twelve or thirteen hours—whole nights for minimum pay. The work was tiresome and unrewarding because I had to clean the lavatories as well as the dishes—and you can imagine how a lavatory looks at a night club. The work really damaged my self-esteem. I thought that was the best I could hope for, that I wasn't any good at anything. It took me a few months to quit—which I did when I moved to another apartment.

After five years of preparations, I underwent orthognathic surgery at the City Hospital in Olsztyn in March 2017. For the first two weeks after the operation, I stayed with my grandparents—then, as the swelling dissipated and I could leave off the painkillers, I got back to Katowice. Recovery took

about three months, during which I consumed only kid's food and juices. It was worth it: my anxieties about my appearance were finally gone, and my teeth were now straight, my bite proper. In September, I created an account on Tinder and quickly chanced upon my current girlfriend. That was no love story, no love at first sight. Love only came to me after a while, but with double the force. Our relationship was troubled and stormy from the outset: we both had to put a lot of effort into bringing it into its current shape, with many lengthy, serious, and often painful conversations. We both needed to change a lot about our behaviour. Our old beliefs we took with us from our family homes were now in question. We came from two different worlds—I was raised in a problem home, in the cold, and she in a fully supportive but also overprotective atmosphere. It was tough going to find a common language, there were so many things we disagreed about. Family matters were the hardest to resolve because to me, family had no value at all, while for her, it was key. In the end, we pressed on until we found our happy medium. Love grew out of friendship. Today, there are no taboos in our relationship—we speak openly about sex, though I still tend to struggle with that. We know absolutely everything about one another and accept each other.

During my third year, as I regained strength after the surgery, I found employment at a Biedronka supermarket.[4] My days were filled from 5am to 10pm because I was also a regular student. Work at the "Biedra" was as laborious and unrewarding as both my previous jobs. I had to carry heavy loads and put up with numerous unpleasant situations. People are really mean and can vent on a complete stranger for no reason at all. Luckily, the girls at the store knew that and never blamed me for any of those quarrels. The weeks with sticker actions were the worst. God forbid I forgot to give someone their stickers, I became the worst person on earth. Clients counted out how many stickers they were owed and if I gave them too few, they immediately went: "Where's the manager? Call the manager now!" These Świeżaki were some kind of nightmare.[5] I worked there for four months and promised myself I would never get on a till again. In 2018, I defended my BA thesis.

The whole period I spent as a student in Katowice was a time of major change for me. That was when I stopped worrying about my appearance,

4 Biedronka (lit. Ladybug) is a network of discount supermarkets owned by the Portuguese company Jeronimo Martins, often referred to as *Biedra*.

5 *Świeżaki*—otherwise known as *Gang Świeżaków* (lit. The Fresh Ones Gang)—is a series of small plush toys representing vegetables and fruit, offered in a Biedronka customer reward program starting in 2016.

when I met the girl I'm with today, when I began to focus on finding myself, when I switched to a vegetarian diet. I became an adult. There were no more unusual clothes, no more wrecking of my hair with dyes. Even though my choice of degree wasn't a good one, my studies gave me a lot. They certainly awoke in me a thirst for answers. I was assigned plenty of philosophical readings that I would likely have never chosen on my own. It was only then that I discovered the value of knowledge. That's also when I got my first ever scholarship. I managed to get my BA thesis published, and I'm just so damn proud of that. It was there in Katowice that I found people who accepted me and the history I came with.

Two girlfriends

I arranged a meeting with Pola, who I'd met on the Queer.pl website. She seemed cool, I liked exchanging messages with her. First we went to a bar, and then I invited her to my place. Along the way, we bought some Miłosławski cider and a pack of cigarettes at a Żabka store.[6] I told her from the get-go that I didn't want sex or a relationship, just someone to talk to—but like a human being, not a chit-chat machine. About serious stuff, my thoughts, this rotten world. And since we hit it off so well at the bar and I was running out of dough, time came to move to a cheaper place. When we got into the apartment, my old girl immediately ran to Pola, jumping for joy—as if she was welcoming someone she'd known for ages! We spent all night playing songs by Maanam, Mira Kubasińska, Edyta Bartosiewicz, Varius Manx, and Hey, old records by Bajm. We talked for hours. I'd never felt this kind of connection with anyone. No one I knew had been so easy to talk to. We became the best of friends. She also introduced me to a friend of her own—another lesbian. Together, we went to free concerts, exhibitions, and clubs; we went to events hosted by LGBT+ organisations and on Pride Parades. We were inseparable. These two chicks turned my life around. They cared about animals, were compassionate, never talked shit about anyone, didn't live for the latest gossip or the current weather. They broke established norms and stereotypes. Thanks to them, I turned vegetarian, became more conscious. They didn't blabber on about penises, anal sex, or blow jobs. I could finally talk about my exes, the girls I liked, the things heteronormative folks don't get. I didn't need to explain how lesbians can have sex without a penis or whether I was the butch or the femme in my relationships. It was nice to

6 Żabka (lit. Little Frog) is a network of small franchise groceries found in many cities and towns in Poland.

have friends who understood me. My path and Pola's soon diverged, but I will never forget our friendship.

Back to Warsaw

My girlfriend completed her studies, and I passed my BA defence and became a graduate student. In the first semester of my Masters studies, I went to the Czech Republic on an Erasmus scholarship. This was a vital test for our relationship, which we both passed, though barely. I wanted to have fun, go to parties, meet people, travel with new friends—and she was alone at home, jealous. And I really can't blame her, as much as it hurt me then. I thought she was restricting me. We argued often; I cried into the telephone every evening. I found myself between a rock and a hard place—I felt I wasn't using my Erasmus trip to the full and blamed myself for it, but on the other hand, I felt guilty for spending too little time with my girlfriend.

When I came back, I decided I didn't want to study anymore at the University of Silesia. Compared to the college I'd joined abroad, our Polish institute of philosophy was piss-poor. Besides, it turned out our dog had got cancer. I finished the first year and my girlfriend and I took a fateful step: "We're moving to Warsaw!" Neither of us liked that city, but I knew we had to escape from Katowice to spread our wings and get some experience, find a good job. And Brenda needed specialist care that was hard to come by in Katowice. It wasn't easy to leave Silesia—it felt like home. In July, we loaded up a removal van and went our way, even before I was admitted to the university or found a job. We wanted a garden and a ground floor apartment because of the dog. By some miracle, we managed to find exactly the place in the Żoliborz district. Luckily, my girlfriend had already sorted out a job; it took me a bit longer, with my sparse CV, but I too found work at a corporation. I took what they gave me because I needed the money—an office job seemed better than manning a till or working at a restaurant. It's not my dream job because I'm handling administrative stuff at an insurance company. But I know it's a temporary solution and I'm not going to stay there long.

In September, I was admitted to the University of Warsaw. I was glad because everything went to plan: we were living in a green neighbourhood, in a nice apartment, we both earned good money. Normally, we would already be saving towards a deposit, then take out a mortgage, buy a car. Well, we didn't have plans like that then and we still don't. We don't intend to live on borrowed money because neither of us likes the idea of repaying a debt our whole lives. I never understood people who take out loans for

thirty or more years—and that in order to buy an apartment in Warsaw, where everybody knows prices are made up of air and prestige rather than square metres. If we were to buy a place for ourselves, it would be in the country, somewhere warmer than Poland, with a bit of arable land, and not in the Polish concrete jungle. And not for money we don't have. Because my mother was always in debt, I decided never to be as irresponsible. You don't know what can happen—I prefer to rent a place and be able to leave whenever I feel like it, without any consequences. And we do want to leave, as soon as possible! It makes no sense to dig yourself in when you're still young. I can make a home in a rented place. Of course, it bothers me that the owner won't let us get rid of the wall unit, but that's not the end of the world. My girlfriend made us some furniture, and we brought the rest with us from Katowice; we both feel at home here.

From the outset, our Warsaw life was more responsible than the way we lived in Katowice. We moved in alone, together, without any flatmates; I became financially independent from my mother, so we both earned our own keep. Our dog was ill and we went from one veterinarian to another, dosing her medicines, attaching her to drip feeds. I loved that dog more than anything. It'll sound corny, but Brenda was the only member of my family I could rely on. I spent thirteen years with her. We put her down on December 30, 2019, and buried her in my in-laws' garden. That was one of the hardest decisions I ever made. I never imagined life without a dog, so we quickly decided to get a new pet. After a few visits to a shelter, we adopted Mira, who is the loveliest little doggie in the whole world.

Now

I really like our place, though it's very Polish socialist style and covered in dog hair. I hope we'll always manage to find apartments like this. The garden is a godsend in times of a pandemic. I love to lie in the hammock and read, I love to take naps outdoors, work on plants. It turns out I'm a homebody. I don't frequent clubs; I prefer having good wine on my couch in front of the TV or throwing a small house party for my friends. My clubbing days are over. Of course, we do sometimes go to clubs, but the music has to be the right fit—hits of the 1970s and 1980s; the 1990s and early 2000s are great, too, but today's music somehow doesn't do it for me. Other than rap—that's something I still tolerate. My girlfriend also doesn't like going to clubs. We spend most of our time alone, but we do sometimes invite friends over. We only interact with people who have no problems with our sexual orientation and our lifestyle. Most of

them are "woke" and share many of our views. I think we have as many straight as gay friends. I don't see much of a difference in those relationships, but that may be because my attitude towards relationships has changed. Before, I desperately sought to be accepted by others, I wanted to be liked, and I moulded and contorted myself to earn everyone else's approval. Now, I no longer need the approval of every person on this planet. I don't need to prove anything to anybody. For many years, my sexual orientation mattered a lot in interactions with others, but thanks to a few male colleagues I was able to reach an understanding with, I no longer see men the way I used to. But it's still easier for me to establish contact with women.

My friends are the family I never really had. I don't believe in blood relationship as an obligation—I view my relatives the same way I do other, unrelated folks, which is why I don't seek contact with my brothers or talk to my father; my mother I do call occasionally. These are the people whose inconsiderate and ignorant attitudes hurt me in many ways. I was everyone's punch bag because I was the youngest and couldn't stand up for myself. Saying you didn't know any better is no excuse—if you don't know, you'd better learn. My closest family now consists of my girlfriend and our dog—not people I'm related to. To be my family, you have to earn it.

I was never particularly attached to the LGBT+ community. I never acted in defence of our rights, never engaged in any campaigns. Though I have a few friends who are devoted activists, I never became part of that. Me and my girlfriend, we go to Pride Parades and sometimes attend events organised by the Campaign Against Homophobia (KPH) or Fabryka Równości (Equality Factory); we donate. The only activism I engaged in (and still do) concerns animal rights. People will manage; animals are defenceless. I wouldn't make a good LGBT+ activist because I have absolutely no faith that Poland can change. I believe we're playing a losing game; we won't win either civil partnership or marriage legalisation, and no one wants to let us adopt children. The only party that supports LGBT+ is the United Left, which has single-digit support. I'd rather leave here than become involved in anything because it all amounts to tilting at windmills. In my view, as a citizen of Poland, I should enjoy the same rights as any other citizen. I should be able to marry the person I love, share my property with her, and know what's happening to her if she's in hospital; I should be able to adopt a child. If not, bye—I'll go somewhere else, where my rights are the same as other people's. It just isn't something I should have to fight for. Why should I? Why me, and not everyone else?

Perhaps like every gay person in Poland, I've endured a few unpleasant situations because of my sexual orientation, even though I've always tried to avoid it. I never looked like a stereotypical lesbian, so very few people knew what I was. I tried not to show it—if I did, it always ended in insults and offensive remarks. I never replied to those. Way back, they used to really hurt me, but today I don't give a shit. The political situation in our country drives me crazy and it doesn't matter to me at all whether anyone sees that I'm gay or not. I'm tired of hiding, passivity, and just standing by while politicians dehumanise me. I never felt Polish and was always ashamed of Poland. It's not just about the treatment of LGBT+ people, but also about climate policy, the downplaying of risks of global warming, and a general lack of social consciousness. I was born in a problem home and survived plenty of trauma, but still, I try to live in a conscious and ecological way—I'm a vegan, I try to make the right decisions every day, while even people within academia show complete disregard for that kind of thing. Because of my experiences, I'm extremely harsh towards other people and view them with suspicion. I feel powerless in the face of boundless ignorance and selfishness. It makes me queasy when I watch the news, when I see the hypocritical elites who won't do anything to save this world. Living here is unbearable and very painful.

We've decided to move to Denmark, and once we have the money we'll buy a vineyard in Italy and set up a vegan agritourism spot. In our dreams, we take long biking trips with our dog by our side—that is, of course, unless the world ends before then. In the meantime, I would like to write about ecological travelling, about the life of LGBT+ people in Poland, about global warming and vegan food. Those are my goals today, though I have not abandoned my childhood wishes. I still hope to fulfil the dream of that small, lost girl.

Life has often kicked me where it hurt, but I'm slowly regaining my footing and keeping my dreams alive. Of course, fear never really leaves me. I fear I will be beaten up because I'm a lesbian, or because I'm a woman; I fear my CV looks laughable compared to those of others; I fear I won't find work abroad, that I won't learn the language, that I won't make it. I fear my studies won't make me employable because everybody's an MA now. I fear our dog will fall ill, that it will die. I fear my girlfriend will leave me, that I'll be all alone again, that no one will catch me before I fall into the abyss of my past. I fear war, climate change, overpopulation, and the struggle for resources. I fear that water will no longer flow from the tap, that someone will burn the vineyard I still don't have. I fear that my as yet non-existent children will have to fight for survival, that they will

not live to adulthood. I fear death. I fear people. I fear I will lose all, but I try not to think about it. Today, I'm happy. I have enough to eat, I have a place to stay, I'm with a fantastic girl, and our dog is the loveliest that can be. I have enough money to cover all my needs and more. I'm in therapy, trying to deal with my past traumas. I try to show who I am in front of others—I want to be myself always, not only with my girlfriend. Slowly, I'm taking off all the masks I've layered on over the years. I don't want to be ashamed of my own history anymore.

I believe I will live a much better life in a more tolerant and developed country. That I will no longer feel the fear and finally breathe freely. That I will finally be normal.

Politics and religion

Neither politics nor religion have played much of a role in my life. I was raised in a family of lapsed Catholics, but of course I was made to pass through all of the sacraments, as one is. I don't believe in God and I don't think I ever did. I remember making a confession prior to my first communion that convinced me never to go to a confessional again. The priest gave me a dressing down, I can't even recall what for. I burst out crying and said my penance with tears in my eyes. I got some Hail Marys and a prayer I didn't know. The experience was so traumatic that I didn't even go to confess before my confirmation or the baptisms of both my goddaughters. I kept myself at arm's length from politics, too. My mother ran for local councillor from the lists of the Civic Platform party and worked in electoral commissions, but we never talked politics at home. I don't think we talked about anything at home. Politics only came into my life when I met my girlfriend. She believes you need to keep abreast of everything that's going on in our country and in the world. She was right when she said that. I know what's going on in politics but it spoils my mood, so now I try to consciously limit the amount of bad news I receive. Looking back and comparing Poland from a few years back to Poland under the Law and Justice government, it's clear—today, there's public acceptance of attacks aimed against LGBT+. Back then it went on behind the scenes, but this acceptance was always there, regardless of who was in government. The needs and rights of LGBT+ people have always been pushed to the side, whoever governed the state. Perhaps something will change once all those old farts who only got into politics to get rich are finally out of the picture.

[Born in the 1990s in the rural West of the country, cis male, homosexual/bisexual.]

11

A Small Town Diary

I was born in 1993 in a small town in the Wielkopolska region, where the word "gay" was usually replaced with "faggot" or "poof." When I was in primary school, I used to call my classmates that—usually those who played hopscotch and hung out with girls during breaks. I didn't know then that in a few years' time I would be the "faggot." Today, I feel disgusted with myself. Not just because I used the oppressor's weapon against the weaker companions of my future identity, but also because the ingrained hatred towards the homosexual community had not been eradicated from my mind at an early age. Sometimes, I tell myself that it wasn't my fault, because the moment I touched my friend's penis for the first time while fooling around in a locker room before a PE lesson at the age of 13—everything changed. I started to look around on my own because sex education was non-existent at school. We only had a single class, during science lessons in fourth grade, where the lady clumsily tried to fit a condom on a banana, and we laughed out loud during her demonstration. Our form teacher found out about it and told the science teacher to stop. We didn't talk about it at home either, and the first time I heard the word "gay" was between classes in primary school.

My father left us when I was 5 years old. He drank and battered us. He moved in with my grandmother, while my sister and I stayed with our mother. We met often, we went on holidays, but usually everything ended up with him drinking and causing rows. He died when I was 20 years old. He had drunkenly fallen down the stairs and smashed his head, causing the long-standing haematomas there to burst. I didn't cry at the funeral. He seemed more like my pal than my father. Besides, I resented him too much. A good memory with him, the one that I often return to, is our trip to Hel. We drove the whole peninsula from Hel to Władysławowo. Us, together, the guys. It was probably the only moment in my life when I felt I had a father, some sort of flawed male role model.

I masturbated for the first time when I was 13, right after an adventure with a friend in the locker room. I was home alone and started touching myself. I don't think I ever told anyone about what happened next. On the table next to me there was my mum's massage device. It had lumps and vibrating

protrusions on one side and a heating lamp on the other. I thought that the heat from the lamp would give me pleasure when I applied it to the area of my genitalia. And that's what I did. I was not fully aware of what I was doing or that what was happening was masturbation. I didn't even know that I should be rubbing my penis up and down at just the right pace in order to finish, have an orgasm and ejaculate my semen. But let's get back to the heat and the device. I accidentally pressed the button that activated the massager and vibrations. Two seconds later, my body experienced its first orgasm, and a white liquid, which I still couldn't name at the time, splashed down my trousers. I felt relief, but also fear. I didn't know what had come out of my penis or if I had accidentally hurt myself. And I was angry because I had to scrub the stains on my trousers so that mum wouldn't realise that I had spilled something on myself. My era of pornography and masturbation began. I did it every day. I never experienced nocturnal emissions during my adolescence because my storage was regularly emptied: by me. When I heard that my friends had wet dreams, I pretended that I did too.

My aunt was the first person in our family to have a computer. She also had a network connection and the then invaluable Internet Explorer. She would sit on the computer for hours by herself—her husband was working abroad and she got into the chat room craze. We often spent the night at her house, and then she would let us use the computer for an hour before bedtime, so that my sister and I could learn how to use the complicated machine and play games. Once I spent a two-week holiday at my aunt's, by myself. I tried typing terms such as "gay sex," "gay men," "gay porn" directly into the browser bar. What I didn't know was that this would lead to my first confrontation with a family member about my orientation, because the browser history didn't erase automatically and I had no idea that it was being recorded. One evening, my aunt asked whether I had searched for these keywords on the computer, as they were at the top of the list of recent searches. I said that I hadn't. She dropped the subject. But she knew, because apart from me and her no one had used this computer for the last few days. After that conversation I was sluggish and nervous, but only for a short while. The temptation to search and the pleasure it gave me was stronger. We never brought up the subject again. Sexuality was never discussed in my family, not even with my mother and sister. Nor does anyone ask me now if I'll ever bring a girlfriend over. Everyone seems to know and avoids meddling in other people's matters. Yet sometimes it would be helpful.

Following my aunt's example, I started to frequent chat rooms. At first, I logged in to the teen themed ones, then I started to browse the erotic

rooms. I was able to do that freely, since I had learned to erase my search history. "YoungGay" as username. The first time the room had over 800 users. I was already 14 at that time. Right away I was getting messages asking for my photos, phone number, and measurements, and sex proposals. I wrote back to everyone, and exchanged emails with those who kept the conversation going and seemed trustworthy. Later on I exchanged webcam photos. Often—nude photos. I knew nothing at the time. Not much even about how the male body was built. Those photos helped me understand some of its anatomical aspects. I had concerns about whether my penis was developing properly. That was my own sex education. I didn't even know what a foreskin was. I thought that mine was somehow abnormal and that I should tell my mum about it. I asked some people in the chat room if they also had that red thread running from the skin on the penis to the middle of the urethra. They laughed and said it was perfectly normal.

Very quickly I went from being a lost teenager in the chat room to an expert, in theory at least, but it wasn't enough. After a few months of visiting the chat, I decided that I would meet someone from the area for sex. I was 14 at the time and the man who came to meet me was 33. Under the pretext of going out for a walk, I headed towards the woods, because that's where our meeting point was. He drove up there in his car, I got in, we drove further into the woods and found a secluded spot. He took out a blanket, spread it on the ground next to the car, and we sat down. And then we had intercourse. How did that make me feel? Good. I was excited and happy that I was able to try. In retrospect, I know it was a crime. I wasn't even 15. He was an adult, but I wanted it badly and he didn't force me to do anything. Besides, I think I was looking for someone older, as I still have that predilection today. I think it's a sign of "daddy issues." I always felt and still feel safer with older men.

After that there were a few different and similar attempts, but I focused on getting to know people at school. I stopped chatting. In high school I found a group of friends that I hung out with on the weekends. We drank, kissed, and some of us went further. In private, of course. In the meantime I also found a girl. She was gorgeous — long blonde hair and blue eyes, and she sang. We were together for a year and a half. I also experienced sex with a woman for the first time. I only enjoyed it because I loved her and wanted to give her pleasure. It was an important milestone, but school ended and I left for college.

I had three serious relationships with men in my life. A boyfriend in Poznań for 2 years—unfortunately he cheated on me. After that I moved to London where I met the love of my life. After a year he moved to Australia

and effortlessly left everything behind. It was the first time I was heartbroken. It seems that the relationship was important just for me. And above all, it seems I wasn't worth a damn to him. On top of that there were the drugs and the big city life. It all broke me down and made it difficult to recover. And then there was the boy from Portugal, whose heart I broke, in spite of everything: I still beat myself up for that. I guess it was the aftermath of my previous relationships. I wasn't ready for another one, but I started it anyway, and the result was that a person who was in love with me broke into pieces. I was 23 years old. No one had taught me before about what relationships between two guys should look like. It was another bit of my self-education. I started a life as a single. Casual sex, turning back to masturbation and pornography, and a penchant for risky situations. On vacation: trips to gay saunas. All this turned sex into a mechanical daily routine for me. Sex without commitment, without relationships, without feelings. Today I struggle to form a healthy relationship and have sex that's not depraved and dangerous. It doesn't always give me pleasure. I don't always get turned on. I often go through with it and feel nothing. However, I have to admit that my current boyfriend is fantastic. I love his personality and our time together. For the first time in a long time I've a feeling that "maybe something will come of this." However, I find it hard, as I need to tell him about everything, and most of all: work on myself. I'm starting therapy with a sexologist and sex educator soon—I have high hopes for this process.

Living in a dysfunctional family isn't easy. It definitely took its toll on my personality, sexuality and relationships. Even now, writing this text, I have a sense of grief. It makes my stomach hurt. These memories aren't easy for me, but they are important, because as an informed and educated person, I know what I need now. I need to address my sex education, because so far I've improvised as I went along. I need to cure myself of the notion that unsafe and vulgar sex is the norm. I want to get a little bit excited, and ask that empathetic, talented, creative and loving boy who I used to be to come back and take the reins.

12

ŁUKASZ[1] [Born in the late 1980s in a small town (less than 15,000 inhabitants), trans man. Lived in the country as a child, now lives in Poznań.]

You're from the backwoods from a broken home you're a dyke no one will ever love you—that's what I heard all my childhood. When I think today about myself in those days I feel like crying but then it also makes me wonder how people can be so ruthless and cruel.

I was born in the late 1980s in a small town in Poland. My parents were together because that's what people did and three months after the wedding there I was. And then three more kids and a divorce cause how long can you stay together just because you think you have to. I always felt mother loved father sometimes even more than she loved us while he loved only himself. I was the eldest of my siblings so I had the most responsibilities everyone expected a lot from me they wanted a daughter that was smart diligent obedient and I tried hard to fulfil those expectations. My early childhood I remember as a good time a bit bucolic deep in religious country without television where everything turned around the church and religious holidays. I spent lots of time outdoors played how I wanted dressed how I wanted and only noticed something was off with me when my mother sent me to school. My tracksuit wasn't cool; a girl playing war or football wasn't liked by other girls; boys laughed at me for trying to be like them, for looking and acting like a boy while I was a girl. These were bad times all of primary school unending persecution and ridicule mental and physical abuse. I remember my cousin once coming back from school called me a dyke and hit me in the belly. I cried coming back from school I was maybe nine and I already wanted to die. People wonder why do kids commit suicide? The only thing that kept me alive in those days was my siblings my responsibility for them. After the divorce mother broke down started drinking. This brought me down even further but I knew I had to get myself out of that life. Sometimes I was afraid to go to school get on the bus full of mocking smiles and stupid remarks. Children pointed fingers at me. One of the older kids said

1 The translation attempts to preserve the peculiar way in which the author uses punctuation—often in blatant disregard of grammatical rules. It is the belief of the translator and the editors that the shifts between normative and non-normative punctuation in the text correspond roughly to the emotional charge of its contents.

I looked like a dyke everybody burst out laughing. So I did what I could to become invisible say nothing disappear in the crowd be a nobody. At the time I also had two best friends. One son of a friend of my parents a good kid respected and liked me the way I was. The other was treated like me by his peers and hung himself in a barn aged 17. We stayed together all through primary school and middle school. With them I was true real normal, they didn't point fingers at me or judge me. In middle school I found I liked girls. I couldn't explain it to myself: on the one hand I felt like a boy trapped in a girl's body on the other am I imagining it—maybe I'm just a lesbian? I was afraid of being made an outcast again I said nothing to anyone made up stories about a boy I was in love with and dating. In dreams I imagined being born a boy having a wife kids house work... I romanced a girl from my class but she saw me only as the keeper of her secrets. At the time my grandma died she was the only one to help my mother raise kids and I was left alone with a bucketful of more problems. When I got back home I did the shopping cleaning homework. When my mother drank I also cooked and afterwards read books and imagined being the protagonist strong carefree and handsome. Sometimes when an LGBT-themed film ran on TV I hid in the room the TV turned down as far as possible and watched cheeks burning red. These were my moments of joy no one could take away from me. Vocational school I chose myself. Everyone from my class went to high school and I wanted to be rid of them and start from scratch. Every day I walked 5 km there and back. But I was so happy to be walking there even frost and snow didn't bother me. I preferred to go even with a fever than stay in a cold and unloving home. My life began to change for the better I became class leader then school leader people began to respect me greet me talk to me. But I was still in the closet. In the evenings I walked the streets dressed like a boy and prayed no one would stop me. I had a circle of girlfriends who liked to spend time with me and I accompanied them home brought flowers paid compliments. I felt like a normal guy. I read a lot of books back then about homosexuality all the articles every magazine in the public library. I didn't visit the school library in case I was discovered. That's how three years of economic college went by. The last year I admitted to a friend that I preferred girls—she wasn't surprised. That gave me more self-assurance. I felt better but there was still something in me haunting me recurring dreams in which I saw a man. I had no one to talk to about it in those days. I thought becoming a man was impossible. Things like these only happened in American films. Here in Poland? In my village? I was so low how am I supposed to live who should I be? I felt oppressed.

It was only when I went to university that I became free: new life new me. New friends accepted me for what I was, I had girlfriends. There were parties, no one gave me strange looks, no psychological torture. At the university I met plenty of people like me: outcasts who hid in the joyful crowd of students, gays, lesbians, trans people. For the first time ever I was satisfied, but something inside me bothered and disturbed me. I remember that day like my best birthday. I was watching silly films with friends in the dorm. The day was rainy and I was sitting on a bed with my girlfriend, and chanced upon a piece about Him. A contestant in a reality show reveals in front of cameras that he used to be a woman. Shock I sat dazed as if I had just heard a human voice for the first time after years of isolation. I understood then that I was like him, that I was not living my own life and that I was a man inside. I looked at the handsome, muscular guy and couldn't believe he was real. For a long time I was afraid to tell my girlfriend about it. It took me several weeks before I mustered the courage, but she received the news fairly well. She said she would support me. I was a bit apprehensive what to do now how to begin where do I find the money? I found a website and a forum on the Internet where people like me explained how to begin, what the procedure was, where to go for help. I read all posts in one night. I watched films about trans people, read books in droves. I wanted to know everything to prepare as best I could for the whole process. I was so excited there was no end to my joy. First a sexologist. I went to the same one as the man from the reality show—the sexologist was there in Poznań, had good reviews. I took my chance. Talking to him wasn't pleasant even discouraging I felt more like an animal with the hundred stupid and intimate questions. Psychological evaluation, then on to the lead doctor—this time I had to go all the way to Warsaw. For me, a kid from a small village, it was a very long journey. But the doctor turned out to be nice and I had no problem obtaining the first prescription the holy grail of every trans person. On the way to the pharmacy I carried it like the most sacred relic: I will finally be myself. The changes came slowly first the voice then moustache beard. That was the worst period. People looked at me with suspicion didn't know what to call me. When I took out my documents issued for my old name in a shop or at university they looked at me with pity as if I was seriously ill or disabled. I gained weight went to the gym. It was then I decided to tell my parents because I had to sue them to change my ID card.[2] They took it badly mother cried father

2 Persons who undergo sex reassignment in Poland have to sue their parents to alter their identification data; for more, see the Introduction, p. XII.

threw me out. I felt horrible bad I felt guilty. I saw them a year later a bit more willing to accept reality but still distrustful and frustrated with my visit. Mother told me to hide from the neighbours so that they didn't talk. When I went out with the dog and walked the country road people came out of their houses to look at me. I understood then there was nothing wrong with me. It's the people in Poland that are prejudiced against anyone who is a little bit different. In court I dealt with everything myself, my parents didn't show up. I drove to Wrocław overnight with my girlfriend 5 minutes and it's done. I called and said it's all settled. Mother hung up. More months of silence. In the meantime I got my ID card and the first surgery—mastectomy. More doctor's appointments more explaining why I needed the referrals and check-ups. When I took my shirt off I could feel how uncomfortable they got. Sometimes they even asked me why I did it. My family didn't even visit me in hospital. In my room was a boy I chatted with; I told him I had a deformed chest—he hated LGBT, spoke with contempt. The only person I could count on was my fiancée, who soon agreed to marry me. I found work, first a physical job, then as advisor at a store—I was quickly promoted to manager. A new chapter in my life began and I finally felt complete. My parents called me a year later, but I still have limited contact with them. Maybe I simply don't want toxic people around me. I lost many friends. My best friend from high school wouldn't even look at me. I gained new ones. I met boys like me, I have people to talk to complain to ask for advice. Now I've moved to another city and have a new job. No one knows who I am, no one has the tiniest idea, and I'm living the life of a normal guy husband father son-in-law and I'm the happiest man alive. Sometimes when I see young trans folk from my city on the forums, I try to help them. Sometimes I go out to talk to them. I see young helpless people hounded by society and media propaganda and I think I used to be like them.

MAX PIEKART [Gay cis male, born in 1993 in Siedlce, lives in Warsaw.]

13

If Only Mum Knew

Introduction

The collection of essays entitled *If Only Mum Knew* came into being several years ago, when my mother and I once again began our uncomfortable yet necessary conversations about the things I hadn't told her over the years. At first, it was a way of expressing my anger at having missed out on a normal childhood, but it soon turned into a queer manifesto, planned as a collection of texts for parents of LGBTQ+ people. Because how exactly do I tell my parents—who, to this day, believe they successfully walked by my side and kept me safe—that for years I wanted to end my life, that I never felt loved by them, that because of them I ran away to another continent, just so I wouldn't have to see them for a while?

No, it's impossible to talk about such things. And equally difficult to write about them. Writing this collection quickly turned into long, unplanned sessions that I kept running away from—sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously—like the true procrastinator I am. There was always something more interesting to do, as long as I didn't open the damn laptop.

For many years I resented my Mother for not seeing all that was happening to me. She didn't see me crying, she didn't see the running away and my systematic withdrawal from family life. That so much of my behaviour was attributed to "teenage rebellion" and not to a depression that dragged on for years.

My degree in pedagogy worked in the opposite way to what you might expect—instead of understanding my mother, I became extremely bitter towards her. My life could have been very different if only someone had told my parents about it. But no one said anything, or they didn't listen. The college years were actual years of rebellion—a dissent so deep that I couldn't get through a single conversation without accusing them of this or that being their fault.

Anger. Oh, so much anger.

This journal is my refuge; here I can write what I think, and how I think about it. It took me about eight years to develop confidence in my own

voice. In the beginning, I wrote things with the secret hope that when I died, they would publish it and declare me the next wonder of the world. That someone would discover me and there would be national mourning that such a talent had been ignored!

Over time, I began to notice not only that no one wanted to read my writing, but that even I could barely read a line or two of it. I filled notebook after notebook and then simply threw them all away (at the beginning I romanticised writing and my notebooks were placed on a golden podium on my bookshelf, as of course I was a great artist). *If Only Mum Knew* started in one of those notebooks, and quickly turned into a real obsession with finding people to blame for my many imperfections and problems. I have to admit that I took pleasure in being able to stick a very specific pin on a very particular person. Locating the blame in the right place and time. I was able to breathe again. Everything had its cause and effect.

The world is obviously not that simple (which is a pity!), although unfortunately I only understood this after years of experience as an educator and teacher. Everything is a consequence of everything else, and it became impossible to disconnect one thing from another; no pin has a specific place, the blame is never a hundred percent. So I gave up writing and was even a little relieved, because how long can you spend digging into your past?

A very long time.

That's my answer after writing these texts. It's a very long and very extensive task.

The problem of irrelevant stories

As I see it, my childhood was somewhat traumatic, but I don't want to make myself out to be a victim. As we grow up people begin to open up to us with their stories, which in my case, unfortunately, decidedly differed from those of a normal family.

We have reached a stage where psychological or physical violence no longer raises eyebrows; rape, being thrown out of one's home, or even being sent to "correctional camps" are shocking, but does anything in the world really shock us anymore? Are there things truly so impossible to bear that we can't go on working, doing our shopping, watching cats on YouTube?

If the media categorise stories into important and unimportant, only the thrill of novelty or some incomprehensible cruelty attracts further viewers. So how are people supposed to feel when they're affected by a tragedy, but one not quite tragic enough to earn the front page of a newspaper?

And worse—how can you be angry that you're not on the cover if it features the story of a person wronged in twelve more extreme and traumatic ways than you've experienced? What does it matter that I occasionally took a beating, compared to the fate of someone who's had their arm cut off by a madman or had acid poured on their face?

How can we go about describing our lives if we know that our story is neither new nor shocking, but merely *told* and then prepared to be passed on? Is this an expression of megalomania? Is it narcissism for the 21st century?

The poor are baffled by the suffering of the rich. The sick are baffled by the suffering of the healthy. We are baffled when a beautiful person says that *today she looks like shit*. We are shocked by an athlete saying that he's put on weight and needs to lose it.

We cannot understand another person's problems. Why do music stars talk about their sadness when they're living what we think is a dream life? Why hasn't the job promotion we dreamed of brought us the solace it was supposed to?

I don't know if I could call my experiences extreme. Was there physical violence? Yes, there was. Was there psychological violence? Also yes. But didn't I have a roof over my head? Didn't I have pocket money, and didn't I go on holiday every year? I always had clothes, a phone that was replaced every two years, my own computer, and a huge amount of spare time that my parents didn't try to fill with hours of piano practice. I had extra tuition in maths and English (starting in primary school until the end of high school). I went to pottery and acting classes, I played the piano. In primary school I even went to see a psychologist when my mental health was low.

So you could say it wasn't that bad.

Then where do I get the audacity to go ahead with writing this?

I used to work in Family Court, so I've heard my fair share about human tragedies and I know what they really are: what destroys people, relationships, and families. Does my story deserve to stand alongside them? Apart from the fact that I wrote it down, does anything make it worthy of being passed on? How many stories that are fuller, farther-reaching, more honest, are waiting to be jotted down?

These mixed feelings have been with me since my first attempt at working on these texts. The constant feeling that my story just isn't important enough, that in view of the international situation (I'm writing this in 2020, when COVID-19 is in full swing), or even the situation in Poland (here, it's

the stuff with Margot, the labelling of LGBTQ+ as an ideology, not people, the inadequate justice system, etc., etc.)[3] there are more important things to discuss than my quibbles about how some boy treated me in primary school. I can't stop thinking, not even for a second, about how irrelevant it is to describe these things I've already spent so many hours on.

At the same time, I'm well aware how important the genre of biography is; I myself have rediscovered myself and my own life many times after reading other people's memoirs. I've found out what my life could have been, or what, thank heavens, it did not become. I was reassured that I was worthy of standing here, that I could occupy this space. Wasn't it podcasts like *Tu Okuniewska* (*Okuniewska Speaking*) and *Ja i moje przyjaciółki idiotki* (*Me and My Idiot Friends*) that helped me understand my relationship with myself, my depression, my lovers?[4] Wasn't it *Hunger*, the biography by Roxanne Gay (an all too appropriate name), that helped me understand my relationship with my own body? Wasn't it the videos on Instagram and YouTube created by authors I adore like Erin Morgenstern, Leigh Bardugo, and V.E. Schwab, that helped me understand that every writer considers their own story a silly absurdity, a white man's whim?

So I'm writing—not for reward, nor for fame, but for all those people who think their stories don't matter. Maybe our stories don't actually matter and will be read by no one, or worse, by someone who'll simply forget all about them. But should that stop us from saying that they are important to us? That, for us, they are worth telling?

With the excuse that I need to be detail-oriented—with the argument that I need to analyse myself not for my own sake, but for research—I'm writing. As honestly as I can.

Family

Family structure

We used to live in a house on the outskirts of Warsaw. Me, my brother, who's two years older than me, my father, and Mother. Each of us had our own room and a computer, which was very conducive to distancing from one another. However, there was a rule that we always ate dinner together on weekdays and all meals together on weekends, so it's not like we isolated ourselves completely.

3 For more on Margot, see the Introduction, p. XIV—XVIII.

4 *Tu Okuniewska* and *Ja i moje przyjaciółki idiotki* are the titles of two highly popular podcasts produced since 2018 and in 2019–2022, respectively, by Iceland-based podcaster and author Joanna Okuniewska.

Mother was responsible for all the domestic chores: cooking, laundry, ironing and childcare. Father took care of very little. In fact, he mainly drank and played computer games. The great absentee of my upbringing. Mother drove me to almost all of my extracurricular activities, events, and places I felt like going. I don't know how she managed to balance that with her full-time job at our company. I don't know how any woman manages it.

My brother moved out in 2012, when he was 20, and I moved out in 2013 at the age of 19. My parents divorced not long after that—in 2015. My Mother moved to Warsaw to live alone, and my father stayed in our old house.

With my father

I'm writing about this right away, because future scholars will be interested in my relationship with the *first male in my life*. Let me start by saying that, as might be expected, my father and I are very distant from each other. We are very much alike, so I guess that's why there was such a rift between us. We can see our own faults in each other, we are each other's mirrors. And I guess that, just as people with body issues can't bear looking into a bathroom mirror, we can't look at each other either. Then there's the frigidity and toxic masculinity that, like it or not, we've been culturally conditioned to exhibit.

When did they know I was gay? As a person who is perpetually curious and writes his own journal, I've always been fascinated by other people's diaries. What do they write? How do they write it? Who are they writing about? How do they choose their topics? So when I came across my Mother's diary, obviously my teenage brain didn't hesitate. I read that she had found some porn pictures of guys on my computer desktop. That she'd told my father about it.

Just like in a film—that feeling of the ground sinking under your feet.

On the one hand, I understand. She wanted to talk to her husband about her son. Gayness was taboo at the time, nobody knew how to deal with it or what to do about it. In fact, it could even be a story from a film—a homophobic father discovers that he has a gay son and suddenly becomes the head of an organisation that supports other gay people.

But no, that didn't happen.

The story is interrupted for a few years, because no one said a thing. As is generally the case with many topics in that house.

Generally speaking, when it comes down to it, I don't know how to feel. Neither of us was ready for this kind of conversation, so maybe it's a good thing it didn't happen. I don't want to judge my parents' choice, because every choice can be justified or negated. I'd like to have been born into

a home where things were spoken about openly and everyone cared about each other, but my home was different. It wouldn't be fair to expect anything else in this situation.

Years later (around 2017/2018), I met with my father and tried to close this chapter. To look for an explanation as to why he did what he did. I couldn't get the words out and the tears just rolled and rolled. I learned from this "confrontation" that it was my father who had been waiting for me to mention the subject. To be the one to start the conversation. It turned out that he was a sun-bathed harbour with a Caribbean breeze, and that he was ready to take on the subject whenever I was ready. How quickly sights of violence evaporated from my head, how quickly I believed that it was actually me who should have taken the first step.

But how do you start a conversation about being gay when all you hear at home on the topic is "these faggots," and when "homo" is the worst insult that could be thrown at you?

Dear parents, that isn't how it works. You can't create a toxic environment full of hatred, fear, and lack of understanding, and then blame the victim of the violence for not speaking up. The "you should bring it up yourself" argument only applies when reluctance to confess is the only limiting factor. It doesn't apply when we're expected to do it despite the fear of physical attack, of systemic consequences (in this case, for example, restricting computer time or the ability to leave the house). It just doesn't. I'll say it like it is—this is an abuser shifting responsibility to the victim. This is manipulative and derogatory behaviour. It also has an official name—gaslighting.

My father and I couldn't seem to get along on any level. All my childhood I'd tried to please him in some way, but with time I understood—no matter what I did, I would always be a disappointment to him. Apparently, a few years ago, he wanted to try again, wanted to contact me. But for me it was too late. I'd already managed to cross him out of my life, so subsequent attempts at conversation looked like another kind of manipulation, another game of his. I don't know. Did he feel he had lost? Divorced. Without one son. The other one barely, barely there. He's not young anymore, so maybe it was some kind of crisis?

His ex-girlfriend wrote long letters asking me to write to him, that he craved contact with me. She sounded like my Mother just after the divorce—she also wanted me to have some kind of contact with him, after everything. They erased the memories of their own abuse, memories of him saying they weren't worthy of him, calling them stupid cows. Yes, these are exact quotes.

I'm amazed at how quickly we can forget such things. How we crave to forgive other people. His ex-girlfriend kept sending me long emails until a few months after they'd broken up. She wrote that she missed him and said how good he was, and in the following paragraph: that he'd told her he never loved her, and that she was too stupid to be with someone as smart as he was.

I don't respond to either emails or texts. I have blocked him. I try to erase him from my life. Sometimes I take a moment to remind myself that I had a father. That I have a father.

Brother

My brother was and still remains a stranger to me. We may appear to live in a shared world, but I get the impression that somehow we've never met in the same reality. He always impressed me. English came so easily to him, mathematics was a piece of cake. He read a lot of books, but also played computer games brilliantly (let's agree that this is a real indicator of being cool). Everything seemed to come easily to him, or at least *easier* than it did to me, while I was perpetually toiling away and had nothing to show for all that sweat. Naturally, my obsession with my brother manifested itself in forms of jealousy and envy, an unhealthy obsession to imitate but also to actively negate *everything* he did.

I don't know if I thought of him as my saviour or my protector. We moved in different social circles—divergent interests, but also the types of acquaintances we had and the personalities of our friends. Other than the thin wall between our rooms, and a few jokes about games or animated movies, I didn't feel much of a bond with him. He was just *there*. And I was just *there* too.

I remember him reading the book *The Stranger*. I mean, I don't know if he read it or just had it on the shelf. It may sound weird, but at the time I thought of my brother as *The Stranger*. Somehow it just fit. Jakub was not close to me, he was in fact *the stranger*. I haven't read the book, so I don't know if we can take this metaphor further. Would anyone care to elaborate?[5]

He was not my confidante. Nor was he my problem solver. I know I must have irritated him enormously. I didn't have much of a life of my own,

5 *Ten Obcy* (The Stranger) is a 1961 novel by Irena Jurgielewiczowa, commonly featured on the list of required and additional readings in primary school in Poland. The "stranger" of the title is a teenage boy who interlopes among a group of schoolchildren in rural Poland, becoming their friend and falling in love with one of the girls in the group, only to eventually disappear again.

and my introverted nature didn't allow me to meet too many people. So I would sit in his room, commenting on e v e r y t h i n g he did. We fought over anything that came within a ten metre radius. Sometimes, even during those fights, I had a flash that I didn't know what I was fighting for and, in fact, why I was doing it. I did it for no reason, because he just cared about something. Maybe I just needed someone to pay attention to me? To be important enough for someone to fight with me over something? To take a side in a conflict? To not be irrelevant.

Now I understand his annoyance with me, and I'm quite impressed by his self-control. I would have hated myself during that period.

If you are reading this, I sincerely apologise. Your brother was a very, very lonely boy.

Mother

Mother remains an unfinished equation, as she is the only one I still have a relationship with. On one hand, I'm grateful for the years when she showed me care and love, even though for a long time I failed to understand that love. And on the other hand, I disagree with a lot of what she says and does. I don't know if I'd want to have her around if we were strangers. Oh damn, how hard it is to write stuff like that. And even more so knowing that others will read it. But that's the truth. That is my truth, at least.

Growing up I can see how little there is you can count on in this world. Everything changes, friends emigrate, relationships fall apart, governments disappoint, and wars break out. But I'm one of the lucky few, because my Mother is always ready to help me. And seriously, I'm not exaggerating when I say always.

She'll support every crazy idea. She'll give her opinion on every decision, and even when we disagree she'll still support me. She'll cross a continent to be there for me through another one of my breakdowns. She'll take care of me and won't reproach me for moving back in with her in the middle of a pandemic and taking up half her flat. When I call her, lying on the floor in tears that life is crushing me again, she immediately sends me to therapy and writes regularly asking if everything is OK.

That's my Mother.

And at the same time, being absolutely honest, I have to say that throughout my childhood and early adulthood I did not feel loved. But maybe that's because I wasn't emotionally mature enough? I was taken care of, that's a fact, but I didn't feel loved and understood. Maybe it's because of our different love languages?

Years had to pass before I began to appreciate her thoughtfulness, which even now, in some cases, I only manage to understand in retrospect.

School

Are you a homo sapiens or a hetero sapiens?

Funny how many memories resurface while I'm writing this.

In primary school, during a break between maths classes, Michał and Paweł came up to me in the corridor, giggling. They asked if I was homo or hetero. I'd heard the words before, but I was just a kid in primary school—all I thought about was Lego and cartoons on Fox Kids.

I didn't want to answer because, subconsciously, I knew it was a trick question. I felt that any answer provided would be perceived as wrong, but now a group of our classmates was waiting for my response.

I know homo sapiens from science lessons, so I say I'm a homo.

They all burst out laughing and point fingers at me. No one can explain to me why they're laughing so much, and it's a while before someone tells me that homos are people who, you know, do it with other guys.

I immediately start crying out: No! I'm normal, I'm not a homo! I'm normal!

Natural exam

In the Integrated Class[6] (who came up with that name?) in primary school I heard about the natural exam.[7] That it's a very important exam, and you have to do well in it if you want to have a good job in the future.

Panic. Cold, hairy panic.

They'll know. After all, it's a natural exam, an examination of nature. They'll find out that I'm not into girls. It will be obvious. I'm not natural!

I avoided the subject. I was afraid of this natural exam. How much time do I have left before everyone finds out? No, let's not think about it. As soon as someone began talking about this exam, I would immediately leave the conversation (physically or mentally) and hide. A long time passed before I realised that it was a matriculation exam. Just another test of knowledge.

The relief. The sense of calm.

No one will know.

6 Kształcenie zintegrowane (Integrated learning)—formal name of general classes in the first three years of primary school in Poland, combining the teaching in various disciplines and usually taught by a single teacher.

7 *Naturalny* (natural)—a mishearing of *maturalny* (the matriculation exam).

Book Fair

In the last year of primary school (six years) we had an enjoyable event in our Polish classes—the teacher let us choose what the next reading for group discussion would be. Everyone had to prepare a short presentation about their favourite book and then, by means of an anonymous majority vote, we were to choose one we would all read.

Sometimes I like to think about the thought processes that went on in our heads.

It was a private school and we only had thirteen students in the class.

I'm not sure, but I think the proportion of girls and boys was about even.

Anyway, it's the day of the "book fair" and one of the girls, Marta, presents her book: *Girls in Love* (I don't think I've ever seen a cover that ugly).[8] Advertised as a book for girls, about girls. And about love, of course.

Faced with some highbrow counterproposals, whether as a joke or maybe just out of natural curiosity or for the sake of pushing boundaries, most of the boys voted for this book.

What was my thought process? I wanted to see what that love was. How girls live. I wanted to experience this book and this world, and there would be no better opportunity! If someone caught me reading *Girls in Love* they would think I was weird and effeminate, and now I had an ironclad argument—I was *required to* read it. An argument I recited ten times in the Empik bookstore, to make sure the woman at the checkout *knew for sure* that I was *a normal boy*.

I was so happy that I could read the book without worrying about other people's judgement. I locked myself in my room and soaked in the whole story like nothing before. I wasn't really the bookish type, so it came as a shock. I devoured it so quickly that when I came to school on the day of the reading, Marta asked:

— And how did you like the ending?

— Great!—I answered, probably more as a reflex than from any reflection. At last I'd found a book about *true* love and was amazed that the author had not yet won the Nobel Prize. It was the most brilliant novel of the century! So sensational that the ending was slightly incomprehensible to me.

— And did you enjoy that particular storyline?

8 *Girls in Love*, published in Polish as *Dziewczyny się zakochują* (Poznań 2008), is a young adult novel by Jacqueline Wilson. (The cover of the Polish edition is a near-exact copy of the original cover.)

What storyline? Well I guess the romantic one, but that's what the whole book is about, so... what's the point of the question? Then another girl came along and squealed:

— Oh god, yes! The storyline about how he's gay!

WHAT?! THE HOW?!

There was a gay man in there?!

And *I FAILED* to notice him?!

I open the book, checked with Marta. Indeed. In fact, the main object of desire turns out to be gay. Mentioned subtly because they only held hands, but mentioned after all. It was there. It is there. It's there *on the page*.

I'm on pins and needles waiting for us to discuss the book and the storyline. Until the last drop, until the last second, I waited for the Polish teacher to get to it. She gives the final summary and I can't get a word out. We haven't touched on it! Nobody has said a word about the SOLE important moment. Which, for me, was also the first moment I encountered gay people in literature!

Now, perhaps, I'm no longer all that surprised. Was it maybe too controversial for the time? Or maybe the teacher hadn't even read the book, so she didn't know? Though I still think it's interesting that even in a private school, with high tuition fees, the subject never came up. And if the teacher wasn't comfortable with even a mild reference to "holding hands," what would be acceptable?

No faggoting[9]

That was the incident that turned my life upside down a bit. I was in the second or third year of middle school. A Salesian school, run by priests. It was here that I began to question God for the first time.

There was one PE teacher who made me not hate going to sports classes. I don't know if he consciously recognised the kind of complexes that an obese boy has to deal with during adolescence, but he saw and understood. He was the only PE teacher who didn't try to motivate me by telling me how fat I was and that women preferred muscular men. He let me jog around the field while the others played football. An absolutely great human being. My Oscar nomination for best teacher.

Football has always felt too violent and aggressive to me. Too male. As a gay man slowly becoming more self-aware, I also knew it was something I shouldn't be interested in, so I didn't try either.

9 For more on the origin and meaning of the term, see n. 3 on p. 44.

Funnily enough, and perhaps predictably, I developed a special fetish for footballers. To this day they seem masculine in the extreme, with their outfits and gorgeous shoes. I've been trying for years to unlearn this way of seeing them.

But let's return to school.

One day a sticker appeared on the inside of our locker room's door. It was the "classic" sticker proclaiming a ban on pedalling. I remember being very surprised. I didn't really know what "pedalling" was, and it didn't look anything like a bicycle.[10] Somehow, subconsciously, I sensed that the word meant what I thought it meant, but until it was spoken aloud I wasn't convinced. My body froze.

Gay.

I didn't feel like a part of the school, but I wasn't excluded from anything either. Right then and there it occurred to me that my sexuality could be a specific problem for other people.

I myself didn't have a firm position on my sexuality. Or at least I didn't until that moment.

The guys applauded and laughed. No! They didn't want any fags here!

It may sound stupid to say that I remember exactly what was going on inside my body at the time. But some feelings you just don't forget. I'm folding up inside, like origami, bending in upon myself, getting smaller. I disappear.

And then I didn't occupy any space at all. I was not a body in the locker room. I physically felt the birth of something new inside me. Something that didn't want to share space with anything else. That's when I met fear.

Before, I'd been afraid of my parents or a scary monster in a movie. But now I felt that this monster had no physical boundary. It was all--encompassing, disembodied. And the worst part was... that it *knew*. It saw that I had the word tattooed on my face and it *knew*.

Mr. O., the PE teacher, turned red like I'd never seen him before as soon as he saw the sticker. He was furious in the way that only people who n e v e r get furious can be. He roared like a lion. He was boiling with indignation. Steam would probably have shot out of his ears if it could.

— WHO DID THIS?

10 The sticker in question, an oft-reproduced homophobic image, presents two male traffic-sign figures engaged in what appears to be a sexual act behind the red "do not" sign.

We were silent, and deep down I thanked the world that someone wasn't banning me from existing.

When the teacher left, the guys started giggling that he was probably gay too. No. That he was a *faggot*.

Until I began writing this section, I didn't realise how significant this experience was. How important Mr. O's behaviour was to me. Because of my *uncool* situation at home, I didn't think of school as just another battlefield. School was boring and difficult, but it wasn't threatening.

I realised that the worst thing that could ever happen was to be a faggot.

Jesus had long hair too

We're back at the Salesian Middle School, a place truly abandoned by God. There's a corridor with a fresh coat of paint because someone had broken in during the night and sprayed something offensive. *What did they write?* I ask people. It takes me half a day to find out.

The priests didn't like it that some students wore their hair long. Of course only the male students, because as everyone knows—*a real man* cannot have long hair. So an official request was made to the parents that all boys should cut their hair short, as befits a man.

The writing on the wall said: "Jesus had long hair too."

Inner life and culture

A tent

The first time I felt something was "wrong" was back in the early years of primary school. A new boy moved into our housing estate, and with him came an aura of mystery and excitement. Because how could you have a life outside the one I had here? On this tiny estate where there were literally two kids—me and my brother.

I remember the thought that dawned in my mind in that moment: he was pretty. That face, that hair, ahhh. I hadn't felt that way about an actual person before. Usually it was characters in cartoons or books.

We had a tent set up in front of our house, one of those childish creations in ridiculous neon colours. A flimsy tubular structure that needed to be weighted down with rocks around the edges to keep it from flying away. It was my entertainment centre at the time, so I wanted to show him *how we played here.* We could barely fit into it when we were sitting down, even at 8—9 years old.

Because of the heteronorm, of course, it's fun to role-play. Well, I really wanted him to play the father while I, *hahaha hihihi, oh, how funny*, I'd play the mother. You know, *ironically and just for kicks*.

I often supported my decision with statements like "hahaha, because there's no other choice." I was looking for a systemic solution to my need to belong to the female part of the heteronorm. Or maybe just to the non--male part of the heteronorm?

He got scared. Did I overreact or something? I remember wanting to kiss him, to be kissed by him. I wanted there to be only this tent and us. Forever.

Not-being a man

I've never felt fulfilled in the male part of the hetero equation. It may sound a little extreme, but there was no moment in my growing up when I felt, even for a second, like I was the man my culture and society created me to be.

I have always felt some dissonance when coming into contact with hetero culture, but also, surprisingly for me, when coming into contact with homo culture.

Let me explain.

Anime—Seme and Uke

I was heavily influenced by Japanese anime and manga, where homo/trans themes were discussed more freely, though still under the watchful eye of the patriarchy and conservative role division. In fact, it was one of the few windows into the gay world for me, if not the only one. I don't include pornography—I'm generally talking about stories where single-sex couples were featured without any sexual context.

In Japanese gay stories there is a dichotomous division between *Seme* and *Uke*.

Seme is a classic copy of our well-known straight guy. Most often still completely unaware of his attraction to men. He is (always) muscular, (always) tall, (always) rich, (always) handsome, and what's most pertinent to my deliberations—ALWAYS TOXIC.

I devoured gay anime (*Yaoi*—featuring sex, *Shounen-ai*—without sex) and unfortunately these were my only exposure to homosexual culture until high school. So my concept of a masculine man included only toxic definitions—cold, distant, rejecting emotions, a perpetually horny sex machine, a dominant personality that always got what it wanted,

objectification, the cult of the muscular body. So, in short, I was being served the heteronorm on a plate.

Uke is the passive part of the gay duo (because, obviously, dominant/submissive is the only possible relationship). A delicate little boy with an artistic flair, a pudgy sweetheart, a cutie with perfect skin and that twinkle in his eye. Add a tragic past with some trauma and you have our *Uke*. To round out his obviousness, he just has to fall in love, without any reason for doing so, with the *Seme* he meets.

Maybe all this wouldn't be so bad if it weren't for the toxicity of the relationships being depicted. Sex without consent, emotional manipulation, infidelities (because the *Seme*, as a true male, obviously has a wife/girlfriend), lack of capacity for dialogue, solving problems through sex or violence rather than conversation. The general accessibility of such a message made my tiny brain perceive these absurdities as not only normal but desirable. So I was ignored and treated as a sex toy. I believed that I had to (ugh!) give myself to a man in order for him to accept me as I was. I assumed that sex on the first date was nothing strange, that sex only on the second or third date was unnatural. I didn't just accept humiliation, ignoring, yelling and manipulation—I sought it out. The only thing I wasn't able to accept was respect for my needs and boundaries. Then I got bored and walked away.

I didn't identify with either *Seme* or *Uke*. They were both too perfect, each usually had a traumatic past (rape, beatings, and suicide attempts were a pillar of each character story arc). Things weren't exactly rosy with me, but I didn't experience dramas on that scale. I wasn't traumatised enough to identify with these characters, and the beautiful bodies on the screen didn't match my overweight body; Uke's artistic skills didn't match my scribbles in the margins.

Being gay, I didn't feel gay.

Because if that's the definition of gay, and I don't fall into the definition, then what am I?

Not-being

Mother once told me that she was very proud that I don't look like a pansy.

This was obviously meant as a compliment, and at that stage growing up it actually was, although it's very worrying how even in the midst of the LGBTQ+ community it's full of prejudice and instant judgements. You would think that this should be one of those safe spaces.

There's a kind of pride in gay culture when you pass for being straight. Or to put it another way, when you pass for not looking gay. Subconsciously, I think we convince each other all the time that being gay is something we should conceal. How many times I was glad that I wasn't thought of as gay—whether professionally (I worked in children's education, and there's plenty of evidence of society's aversion to that combination), semi-professionally (my boss saying she's not ashamed to show me off because I don't look *gayish*), or even socially (walking around town I'm less likely to be attacked by some drunken thug).

I'm not proud to admit that while not being detected makes life more comfortable and helps avoid being seen through the prism of social expectations, being identified as gay makes me feel like I've failed at some game. So much talk about self-love, acceptance and tolerance, and I spend my evenings thinking about how I could have said something differently so that my orientation wouldn't be evident. Some people feel a strong need to boast that *they knew all along* I was gay, and I don't know whether to take it as a boast or a challenge. Maybe it's not the words themselves, but the way they say it. It's like they feel superior because I haven't deceived them with my behaviour (which is probably true, because subconsciously I want to hide my gayness 24/7).

I think I'm getting stuck in a loop. I get annoyed that I'm hiding, but also when someone is able to understand that I'm hiding. Is there any good way out of this situation?

13 MAX PIEKART

I liked women's stuff, or at least I liked looking at it. It made me curious. My subconscious, however, taught me to absolutely disconnect my curiosity from my body—I admired those things, but felt they weren't for me. I was curious, but I accepted the glass window that the culture put up for me. I myself also made sure that this glass didn't move, god forbid. I still love looking at women and appreciating how they dress, but I don't allow myself to wear women's clothes, for example. I don't know how much of this is due to my aesthetic sense and how much is due to the fear of being seen, the fear of being that kind of gay.

For many years I was turned off by trans culture and people who didgender-bending but now I know I was jealous of their strength and courage. I wouldn't have been able to dress up in something so attention-seeking and not drown in shame. And they, despite all these dangers, still chose to be themselves. If that is not true courage, then I don't know what is.

That's how? So how exactly?
So if not this box, which one?

The mainstreaming of LGBTQ+ has allowed new versions of gayness to show up on Netflix or YouTube (and now also on TikTok). Still, it's clear as day that the representation of our community in the media is very detached from reality. Gay-fascinated fashion is a fact, albeit only a selective and limiting one. Just like regular people, we have LGBTQ+ representatives in every industry, at every career level, with every body type, every age, every passport.

Late in life, I realised that gay men aren't just the beautiful guys in their twenties (of course, the slender and shorter are bottoms, and the muscular and tall ones—tops), but literally a n y o n e you see at the airport, the shopping mall, or the liquor store down the block.

How can that be?

We often talk about gaydar, the fictional machine in our brain that tells us who is and who isn't a homosexual. And my gaydar was absolutely brilliantly trained, I could recognise a gay person in 0.5 seconds, but only according to the recipe provided by the mainstream media. If someone wasn't fashionably gay, then to my mind they couldn't be gay at all. A gay athlete? Impossible. A gay man who doesn't go to clubs? An abstraction!

A few years on dating apps gave me a clear answer: gay men are everywhere. The corporate CEO, the farmer, the dance teacher, the programmer, the priest (who knows, knows), the truck driver, but also our colourful mainstream gay-fashionista.

In her lecture *The Danger of a Single Story*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie said: "The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make a single story the only story." And while the lecture referred to prejudice and racist narratives, it is easy to translate this to our gay culture.

I firmly believe that the problem that needs to be addressed is the idea that there is only one kind of gay in Poland—a vegetarian bicycle-enthusiast from Warsaw. For obvious reasons, that's the only one we've been introduced to, but I think we can do something about it now. Every gay man who comes out to his straight friends is adding to the single story we have about gay men. Every coming out is important. They all subvert the myth of the bicycle-enthusiast.

We have Facebook, Tumblr, TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat and it's getting easier to talk about sexuality. It's a wonderful feeling when I go on YouTube and see that my list of suggested videos is full of creators who

freely weave LGBTQ+ themes into their content. Maybe I'll live to see full acceptance in my lifetime? Or maybe it's just my bubble, the people I surround myself with? Maybe it's not as widespread as I think it is?

It's hard not to get the impression that many writers of novels or screenplays still haven't been told that queer love doesn't have to be portrayed as tragic love, a martyrdom of sorts. And while it's true that very often this love is different and difficult, as the years went by I decided to launch a one-man anti-tragedy rebellion.

Public approval of love-as-martyrdom

Many people have written about how our society loves to idealise tormented artists, misunderstood geniuses, and tragic romance. And a few years ago I'd have said that this really is what gay love looks like. That a lack of social understanding surrounds us. That films like *Brokeback Mountain* were masterpieces in depicting complicated love, that they were necessary works to illustrate the number of problems that existed. At the same time, I always rebelled against it—because there were no films starring gay people that had a happy ending.

Nowadays I don't understand why the classic division of roles into *Seme* and *Uke* still prevails in films like *Call Me by Your Name* or *Floating Skyscrapers*.[11] Everywhere you look it's these damn tragedies, crumbling relationships, suicides. *Floating Skyscrapers* made me intensely angry because it was one of the few gay movies that landed in cinemas and it still ended with the tragic (shock!) death of (well guess who) a gay man.

Aren't such stories the reality of LGBTQ+ people? They are. But my question is—why are these our *only* realities?

The change is happening slowly, as we have a slow accumulation of positive stories: *Modern Family* is a series about a homosexual relationship (1/3 of the story), *Grace & Frankie* is a show that chose the moment when two husbands leave their wives to officially become a single-sex couple as its story axis. Also important is *Love, Simon,* one of the few feature films in which the main character is a teenager beginning to discover his sexuality (although here, of course, the drama reaches its zenith when his object of affection is afraid to come out in front of the school).

I'm also still waiting for the first LGBTQ+ character in a Disney, Dreamworks, or Pixar film. Of course we have supporting characters who hint

11 *Płynące wieżowce* (*Floating Skyscrapers*, 2013, dir. Tomasz Wasilewski) is a Polish drama film whose main protagonist, who has been living a "normal" heterosexual life, suddenly discovers a physical attraction to another man.

about their orientation (in a single line), but in many countries (including Poland) these fragments are censored or removed before release. So it's kind of still not there.

LGBTQ+ animations are only allowed entry as short films—like *Out* or *In a Heartbeat*—which sums up how niche the subject still is. It's going to be a long wait for our first animated feature film with an LGBTQ+ protagonist.

Not to mention the complicated relationship that filmmakers have with queer culture—for years, non-heteronormative traits have only been attributed to antagonists. A famous example is the use of drag queens as models for the evil witch in *The Little Mermaid*. Disney (and its ilk) has not only fuelled negative perceptions of queer people over the years, but is now also afraid to challenge them in any shape or form.

Disney's first exposure to openly LGBTQ+ material began in 2014 with *Good Luck Charlie*, a live-action sitcom, where in the penultimate episode (because you only dare to do it at the very end) two mothers were shown with a baby. Only for a second, of course, merely as background, in no way related to the main characters.

The first gay kiss in Disney productions appears in a cartoon (because live-action is probably too big of a step): *Star vs. the Forces of Evil* in 2017. Yes. Three years ago. Only for a second, of course, only in the background, unrelated to the main characters in any way.

Even so it caused an internet storm, when the organisation One Million Moms (known for boycotting same-sex wedding ads on Hallmark) protested the episode, saying it tempted viewers towards sin.

However, by the end of 2017 there's also the first LGBTQ+ character in a live-action teen series, *Andi Mack*—a boy who discovers he is gay. There's no kissing, though, and the whole plot breaks off after the second episode. Still, it's some progress.

In our Polish publishing market, the recent book *Red, White & Royal Blue* was supposed to be a ray of hope, advertised as a funny, adventurous story of two sons of leaders of major countries—the USA and England.

This story has a divorcée with two children who's in an informal relationship with another man, and at the same time... she's the president of the USA. The president is the ex-wife of a Mexican man (which is extremely telling), and all this makes perfect sense in the world of the story. Everything is OK.

With such (let's not kid ourselves) progressive writing fantasy, it's surprising that our main protagonists, two gay men, are still considered

to be something that society can't possibly accept. This leads, of course, to the concealment of the relationship and the classic writing gimmick in queer productions—*nobody can find out*—which leads to inevitable drama and misunderstandings.

I can't and don't want to spend time on stories like that. It's like someone wrote a fantasy book with dragons and magic and castles and all the infrastructure, but no one's invented shoes yet. That's not how the damn thing works.

I don't deny that social oppression exists. On the contrary, every day I discover new ways in which it affects the lives of each one of us. How shame and "it's better not to tempt fate" can paralyse us, deprive us of will and strength. I've been there. I know what it can be like.

But that just makes it even more difficult to understand the absence of stories with happy endings. Why do writers lose track of all the joyful moments we experience, that we know are happening? If LGBTQ+ people say that love is beautiful in any form, why are the movies about us just a litany of tragedy and oppression?

Where should we look for the examples of love we want to aspire to? How can we imagine what our relationships might look like? How do we avoid falling into the trap of toxicity or getting depressed? How do we find solutions when our protagonists commit suicide, marry the opposite sex, run away, or when their stories are simply sidelined from the main plot and often remain unresolved?

The moment of outing or lack thereof: Are you an outed person?

Many people had probably suspected something, but the subject wasn't discussed and I also didn't feel the urge to say anything. With my loved ones—my brother and my neighbour Krzysiek—I wanted to, but I'm not particularly brave. I mentioned to them that I watch *yaoi* (gay anime), and I often hinted at gay themes in films, but I never said anything directly. I had a deep desire to talk about it, to tell someone. People on the Internet weren't enough. I needed an actual person.

Once, I don't remember exactly when, my brother asked me, "Are you...?"

Those three dots still kill me. It still hurts somehow. Neither of us even wanted to say the word "gay." Even saying "gay" was something to be scared of.

I pretended not to hear it. But oh my god, I heard it *clearly*.

I've wondered many times how my life, or perhaps our lives, would have turned out if either of us had been just a bit braver in that moment. If we hadn't been so paralysed with fear.

The real turning point was high school. Here I found my then best friend, and we talked about boys, exchanged internet memes.

I'm still baffled by the choice of the second person I told. Why did I choose Zuza? Objectively speaking, she was beautiful—good proportions, a balanced sort of character, friendly. She was my first inner conflict, because how could a person as pretty, as nice as she was, still think she was stupid, ugly, and poor? Maybe that's what it was? The fact that she was equally lost, equally unwanted?

It was a party at god knows who's, god knows where. A warehouse converted into a place for skaters. We both felt uneasy in the crowd and the party atmosphere, so at some point in the evening we went for a walk and ended up... at a sushi bar. A couple of sixteen-year-olds eating sushi in 2010. Warsaw indeed could be a wonderful place.

And then I told her I was... bi.

Because I couldn't get the words out of my mouth that I was gay. It was like an insult to myself. How much of a nobody did you have to be to be gay? How much of a nobody is a guy who enjoys stuff like that?

I was happy to tell someone. Even if it was still a lie, it was much closer to the truth. It was almost like the truth itself.

Here I'll digress, because it's impossible not to mention it. I was *her first bi*—a sentence I would hear many times in the future. That I was someone's *first bi*, or when I finally managed to be honest, *first gay*. Pokémon collectors, dammit.

After Zuza, other people slowly appeared—Pokémon collectors and their *first gays*, but also people who didn't say anything and kind of ignored what I'd told them. One acquaintance stopped writing to me altogether.

The strangest reaction I've encountered, however, was on the bus, line 186, on the Grota Bridge in Warsaw. The moment became so engrained in my mind that I remember exactly where on the bridge it happened.

— *That's cool. Me too.*

I expected surprise, denial, rejection. But I didn't expect that someone else could also have such an "affliction." What's worse—she wasn't in awe, didn't clap, didn't ask if we could go shopping one day. Nothing that American films and books had prepared me for.

She acted totally normal.

In hindsight I know it was the best possible reaction, but at the time it felt like a blow to the heart. My biggest secret, the most important and hidden part of me, the diamond of my identity... it was irrelevant. Something like a betrayal. That's how I felt it at the time.

For the first time I saw that being gay could be something completely un-fascinating. Something normal. At that time it hurt me a bit, today I prefer such reactions. If someone starts applauding or asking me about fashion, I imagine the sound of the quill pen as I cross them out of my life with a flourish.

Radical and unnecessary? Yes, probably, although this comes from experience too. This type of person often treats me like a Pokémon for their collection, a new brand of burger at McDonald's—a curiosity, but on a one-time-only basis.

It's harder to talk about the times when, after I told them about my orientation, some people at work stopped talking to me on a friendly basis and focused only on the professional side of things. Maybe that's better than being fired or beaten up? Are you allowed to complain if nothing terrible's happening? Being with people like that is weird and uncool, but then it's not like I love everyone I meet either.

Who do you tell about your non-heteronormativity, and who don't you tell? I'd like to say "everyone, and I'm not embarrassed at all," but that wouldn't be true. Shame is a more powerful emotion than anyone would like to admit.

I ask the guys I go on dates with about being outed. I have a (perhaps slightly exclusionary) rule that I just don't date non-outed guys. They often reply that they're not outed because they "don't like to flaunt it. If you know, you know."

Is it just me, or does that sound like internalised homophobia?

It's a very interesting kind of guy in general. The ones who think they're such non-stereotypical gays, that they're basically straight, and the things they do with guys are just unimportant "nothings." They proudly flaunt their illusion of heteronormativity. They think they've discovered the golden mean, the secret recipe.

A few dates with people like that immediately dispel my doubts—we'll supposedly be a couple, but only within the walls of our flat. On the street, we're strangers. To people who don't know us, we're buddies, flatmates, mates. And to friends? A real Schrödinger's Cat. They, too, get caught up in this great conspiracy, which forces us to whisper about each other in public places, touch only in a dark room. Preferably after having something to drink.

It's immediately apparent that this beautiful man, who supposedly looks so responsible and confident, is just as scared as everyone else. He just hides it more neatly—from the world and from himself. I immediately

think of trans people who, despite all this, are still able to show themselves. And to think that they're the ones who are called *unmanly*. They're the ones with the real balls.

It's not that I take pleasure in calling someone a coward. My point is to authentically name what's going on here—these manly men are paralysed by fear of the consequences of being gay. They say that they don't need to flaunt being gay, that it doesn't define them in any way.

I think the problem here is not knowing the difference between the words *to be* and *to flaunt*. They are not afraid *to flaunt* their gayness. They are afraid *to be* gay.

How can anyone really think that being gay doesn't define him at all? Do we live in the same country? Is it the pinnacle of ignorance and thoughtlessness, or a golden ticket in the lottery of life? Is it even possible—to never experience the consequences of being gay?

The obsession with truth

Yes, it's an obsession.

I blame it on years of hiding inside the duplicitous Max. Pretending to be someone else, ignoring inconvenient truths, using figures of speech instead of concrete words.

I became manic in my search for the truth at the end of primary school—the consequence of which is my journal practice. I already knew then that the *self* for others is a very different *self* from the one I have inside me.

Everyone who writes probably goes through that stage when their diaries are not 100% true to what they think or feel. It's natural to fear that unwanted eyes will read our notes and ridicule the style, the thoughts, the spelling. Every narrative is a kind of attempt to take control—to embrace an event and define it. A narrative is a version of reality. And I've grown very fond of deciding my own.

I thought I'd become a great artist one day, so I tried to keep a certain tone. I thought my parents might read it, so I even put the words "I don't smoke cigarettes" in bold because I wanted to prove that I was different, superior.

As of the date of writing this (2020), I've filled a total of twenty-three notebooks. About a third of them were written through the lens of what people would say, meaning: composed by me and my inner content moderator who camouflaged and altered facts to make me appear *normal*. It took me years to develop a voice that didn't lie to myself.

Today I'm unable to sit down and think something over. I need a pen and a notebook. I trust this process more than I trust myself—that's where this obsession with truth comes from. Everything has to be filtered through the notebook.

The result is that I very rarely trust what people say.

Knowing how much nonsense I've been able to tell myself, I live with the belief that other people also tell themselves, and me, a lot that's far from the truth. A quick glance at contemporary influencers only strengthens me in this belief.

So I can't have normal conversations with people who are in the closet. I feel like it's such an important area of life (and yet how unimportant. A beautiful paradox!) that not talking about it (whether avoiding the topic or lying about it) feels like a wide-ranging process of self-denial.

I know that it's a result of the privilege of living in a big city and being a white male. It's a privilege that not everyone in Poland can afford.

At the same time, it seems normal to me that I should expect my partners—travellers from all corners of the world or permanent residents of our beautiful "navel of Europe"—not to hide from their loved ones. That they will not hide me.

Let me explain.

The non-validity paradox

Being an LGBTQ+ person is not unusual. You can't crawl up walls with this ability, you can't even shoot a cobweb out of your wrist. It doesn't give you anything, and in our country it deprives you of all too much.

At the same time, being LGBTQ+ is something very unusual. There's a reason why we talk about the hetero*norm*—after all, it is the norm. You automatically become different, and systemically alien. Some people behave like "fireworks," some prefer to hide in the shadows. But it's undeniably something that forces you to make certain decisions.

While reading about the USA, I came across this statement: *America is such a significant and influential country that it is impossible not to have an opinion about it. You can love it, you can dislike it, but you have to form an opinion*. I feel it's the same with being in the LGBTQ+ community. You can identify yourself with it and march in parades, you can stay in the closet and not *flaunt it*, but you can't be indifferent to it. Our hetero friends, who may not have planned to participate in these debates, having established the norm, are also confronted with this decision. Especially since they, the norm, are the arbitrators of our laws.

And just as we already know that claiming *I don't see skin colour* is a sign of white privilege, here too, in the case of gay people who say *being gay changes nothing*, something is wrong. If being LGBTQ+ doesn't change anything for someone who lives in Poland, it means that they live in a bubble and have completely lost touch with reality, that they close their eyes and ears. A perfect example of a privileged person who can't see past their own nose.

LGBTQ+ lives are not like other lives, and LGBTQ+ love is not the same as straight people's love.

It is a relationship built on completely different foundations, one that had to fight for its own right to exist. It is a love that is denied, belittled, disapproved of, rejected by our institutions. It is a love that doesn't legally exist.

There was an online campaign showing an X-ray shot of two people kissing. The plot twist: it was two women or two men. And then the slogan, stating that love is love and there are no differences.

Well, let me say it loud and clear: not every kiss is created equal. When a couple kiss, they just kiss. But a kiss between two gay men in Białystok is not a kiss—it is an act of rebellion. A rebellion for which we pay with visits to hospitals, social exclusion, or even our own lives. It's a kiss that can get us fired from a job, kicked out of a family, forced to move out. How many straight couples have to take such considerations into account when they want a kiss?

LGBTQ+ love has little in common with systemically approved hetero love. A love that can be legalised, that can grant a visa and even the ability to enter a hospital room. A love that can result in having a child without asking *anyone's* permission.

Our love takes account of all this. It takes into account the fact that people will hate us, that we can't kiss at a bus stop, we won't hold hands at the prom, we won't bring the love of our lives to a work party. LGBTQ+ love is a defective, distorted version of hetero love. An imitation of what hetero couples can have without a second thought and with the complete support of society. These loves try to be the same thing, but they're not, and probably won't be for many years to come. Talking about its sameness is in the most generous terms a *heart-warming wish*, and more brutally *a pipe dream*. The idea may be similar, but putting it into practice is a different story.

That's why it is so important to talk about our love stories. The ones that don't necessarily fit into the heteronormative boxes and end with a house

and children. So that the average consumer knows that non-standard hetero relationships also exist. All this serves to change our *single* LGBTQ+ love story. Queer love won't become "equal" to hetero love, but rather a love that is equally important.

Openly talking about being LGBTQ+: these aren't words that are thrown to the wind. They are words that can blow people up.

That's why it's so dangerous to talk about.

That's why it's so important to talk about.

This is very important. And at the same time it doesn't matter at all.

In this country, however, it matters a lot. So much that some will protest against our marches. They will beat us up and burn things, set up *LGBT-free zones*,[12] and protest the appearance of *"unnecessary" queer characters* in films.

As long as it doesn't actually become irrelevant, it remains very important. It needs to be publicised to the extent that people get fed up with this lack of rights. Because when they see that it's their colleague, their boss, their brother, their hairdresser—then they will at least have some contact with us, see that we exist.

I still come across men who shy away from saying who they are, while at the same time they don't shy away from defining others—faggots, cunts, queers. Incidents in Poland and abroad show clearly that many of the most ardent homophobes are crypto-gays. Why?

I write about all this because it took me many years to understand some simple *truths* that were conditioned by different kinds of fear. Until I started consciously researching different stories, I didn't realise how limited I was myself. We know that we're shaped not only by biology but also by our environment. So why are we so reluctant to question the latter?

I've made a lot of mistakes myself and said words that I would like to take back. It's a little late, but I hope not *too* late. I think that many people have already normalised *making mistakes*, but it's not often that someone *discusses* their errors and the reasons for them. So I'm going to start and

12 Starting in spring 2019, Polish local governments began to issue proclamations against "the LGBT ideology" in reaction to the signing of a declaration of support for LGBT+ people by the liberal President of Warsaw, Rafał Trzaskowski. During the summer of 2019, the right-wing, pro-government daily *Gazeta Polska* added stickers that said *strefa wolna od LGBT* (LBGT-free zone) to one issue, encouraging businesses to use them in their stores and offices. The stickers were removed from distribution by court order for inciting hatred; they echoed in striking fashion the practices of segregating between Christian and Jewish stores in inter-war Poland.

get out in front of the crowd. I also invite you to list three or four examples of things you did in the past that you now regret.

• I used to call some people fags—the need to feel superior, i.e. **fear** of self;
• I didn't go to equality parades and considered them a waste of time—**fear** of admitting who I was to others + **fear** of being beaten up;
• I thought there were too many unnecessary gays in films—**fear** of not being the only gay story;
• I thought single-sex families shouldn't adopt children—**fear** of challenging norms;
• I thought people shouldn't kiss in public places—**fear** of intimacy and my own sexuality;
• I judged and criticised people who dress in flamboyant patterns and colours—**jealousy** towards those who aren't ashamed to be themselves, **fear** of the unknown;
• I thought that the active (in sexual terms) gay man should initiate conversations on dating sites—**fear** of appearing too confident;
• I didn't want to help women with lifting heavy objects and said that if they were such feminists, why couldn't they lift it themselves?—**fear** of coming across as weak (not enough muscles to lift something heavy) and therefore **fear** of coming off as unmanly (i.e. being compared to a woman);
• I thought I always had to want sex—**fear** of not being a man;
• I thought I wasn't allowed to cry—**fear** of being mistaken for a woman;
• I thought that not fitting into the gay stereotype made me better than others—**homophobia**.

My two favourite gays in a car

It's a strange feeling—not being me, Max.

Recently, while driving in the car, I heard a friend call out from the back seat:

— Me and my two favourite gays (meaning me and a friend).

It's rare for people to address me in those terms. I'm a man, a boy, Max, Maksym, a human being, an employee, a son, a colleague, a friend, a lover, a random man, the tall one, the quiet one. But gay?

But aren't I gay? Isn't that just one of the words that describes me? I'm also all of the above, so why does *gay* bother me? Its connotation? A pejorative association built into the social matrix? Fear of consequences? Running away from the truth?

Do we ever address people as *the straight/hetero one*? In the gay community sometimes I hear stuff like that, but in wider society? Do we have

a special word we use? Or is it my selective lens that doesn't see that people address others through the prism of their sexuality?

I don't know. But this reduction to being gay hurt me somehow.

Crypto-homophobia? Quite possibly.

Panic attacks

It's impossible to write about what has happened over the last few months, but it's also impossible not to write about it.

The term "panic attack" has always seemed very dramatic, Hollywood-like, to me. But that's exactly what was happening on the floor in my flat.

The government's reaction to Margot's activism or the homophobus are turning points in the history of sexual minorities in Poland,[13] but not everyone is able to play the game of life and process these kinds of events. My body hasn't developed a mechanism to respond to situations of systemic violence and social oppression like the ones we're experiencing in 2020. Because of the kind of discomfort I feel in crowds and my deep fear of violence, I can't attend marches or protest in front of the Presidential Palace. My anger and powerlessness have no outlet.

It ends up on my floor, where I can stay for hours.

Thinking about emigration is the natural consequence. Again, through the prism of whether I'll be able to be myself in a given country, or whether I'll again be forced to pretend. I must admit that the idea of going to China (from this perspective) was very unfortunate, because I would simply exchange one swamp for another.

The attacks are escalating, although they don't feel as shocking to me as they did before. I think even fear can get boring. What a time!

Sexuality

Oh god, protect me from friends

All this has had strange consequences. I wasn't a girl, I wasn't a boy. The very feminine stuff (fashion, colourful things, lip gloss) seemed peculiar to me, and things that were strongly masculine (football, shooter games, fighting) were off-putting.

I lived between two worlds, unable to settle down in either. For girls I remained a boy, and for boys I was always that strange one who didn't play football and hung out with broads. All female and male friendships

13 Homophobus—see n. 9 on p. 27.

led nowhere, because I found all these people rather strange and from their perspective there was... something a bit wrong with me.

Of course, in hindsight it's easier to spot these patterns of behaviour. Whenever someone got closer and I decided to open up about something, I was called weird. At home I stopped trying—my father was always right and my brother wouldn't listen to me. Mother was too busy working and supporting us (daddy didn't bother) and at the same time, as a victim of physical and psychological abuse, she just didn't have the mental capacity to cope with my problems. I hid in my mind and in my notebooks.

Amazingly, I handled everything very well. People thought I was sociable and funny (oh, if it weren't for our sense of humour, they'd lock all us introverts up), I passed on to the next grade every year, there were no (observed) suicide attempts. At first glance—a classic teenager in rebellion phase, when nothing makes sense.

No one saw (and I didn't tell them) that I didn't consider anyone a friend. Even the Internet didn't provide me with any, although I'd like to be in a story where a random person met in some chat room becomes a long-time friend. Nothing permanent has hatched from that source though.

The depressing loneliness began to wane in high school, where I met Justyna. Someone just as desperate for a best friend as I was. We were perfect for each other—me toxic and abusive, her patient and enduring humiliation in the name of friendship. It was only at university that I realised how bad we were for each other. How mean I was to her. The true products and reproductions of our own families.

She witnessed my first infatuations, became the confidante for my dirty secrets (which, unfortunately, were often far from the truth). However, even with her I'd bend the facts and revised my statements, something I'd practised through years of moderating narratives in my notebooks.

So, for the first time, I present the entire truth about that evening.

And it could have been the perfect murder

My friend Ania was coming home one evening and wanted to talk to me. She asked if she could get off at my stop so I could walk her to her house.

Or at least that's what I told my parents.

I swear, I still don't know how they could believe me, because it was always clear as day when I was lying. Maybe they were happy that finally someone wanted to spend time with me? Or maybe they just didn't care. Either way—they didn't ask questions.

I took a long shower and washed myself with the world's most fragrant gels. I spritzed myself with deodorant from head to toe (as any self-respecting sixteen-year-old would), I put on the trendiest clothes I had, and to top it off, *mind you*, I also put on a stylish hat. Let me remind you that it was 8 p.m. I had never in my life, before or since, pulled off a look like I did that night. I even had a "Sex, drugs & rock'n'roll" t-shirt: a pinnacle of style in my mind back then.

Well, there I was. I'm dressed up, in my Sunday best. I say I'm going to talk to Ania.

He picks me up from the bus stop and we turn right somewhere. Classic small talk, some music from the radio. He stops on the embankment (I used to live next to the Vistula river), not a single street lamp—that ridiculous darkness that I don't think can be found in Warsaw anymore. You can't see your own hands.

He starts to kiss me.

My first kiss. The one that was supposed to be magical and special. Wasted on some random guy from a gay chat room.

How do you even kiss? There is no time. YOLO. *Carpe diem*. Let's go. As my friend says—*I fire up the washing machine*—stick my tongue inside and spin it, 300 revolutions per second. By the way, I think it's the sexiest activity on earth.

No. I don't think that at all. But I think that's how I *should* think. I don't want to be there.

Did I mention that this guy is 30? And I'm 16?

Was this *the* kissing everyone was talking about? The electrifying experience of two bodies welded together with vivid, burning desire?

He suggests that we move to the back seat. We do, or rather I move, because he stands at the back door, unzips and shows me his penis.

It's the first time I've seen an *actual* penis. I mean—not including mine. I've seen them in photos on the Internet, but this is the first real one. It's... different, crooked, has a disproportionately large glans (at the time I called it "that pink thing on top"). I'm surprised, curious, disgusted. All of these at once.

I put it in my mouth and I don't know what I expected. Some particular taste? A feeling? Nothing. Just an object in my mouth. With some texture, but kind of not. I don't know what to do, but I move it closer and further away, just like in the videos on the Internet. I don't know how can you feel any pleasure in this situation. I'm embarrassed with myself, with what's happening. I imagine how it must look from outside.

My leg begins to twitch.

This is the first time it twitches, but it won't be the last. It'll be like this for the next few years—one of my limbs, or my entire body, will start convulsing uncontrollably. I'll be trying to get a grip inside to stop this, but I won't say anything to my partners. I will tell them that it's because of my excitement, my euphoria, because of how *good* the things they're doing to me feel.

— *Easy*—he says.

I say it's not that. It's because of the cold.

He takes off his sweatshirt and puts it on my shoulders. A knight of the 21st century.

Then he unzips my trousers, wanting to warm me up.

There's... nothing happening in my trousers. Absolutely nothing. It's as if all those unexpected boners at swimming pools, in chemistry class, while sitting on the bus—were just a dream. I'm sitting in the back of some guy's car, and my penis, reduced to the size of a peanut, is playing hide-and-seek. This isn't how it was in the movies, this isn't how it was supposed to be. What's wrong with me?!

He keeps licking though, trying to do something, say something. He looks at my twitching leg and tells me to relax. I remind him that it's not from stress, it's from the cold.

I insist that we continue.

I wanted to get it over with. To forget the whole thing. This is a feeling that will come back many times, involving a large number of men in my life. The hope that it would be over and that we would never speak of it again.

He came. On me.

It never occurred to me that he could be a serial killer. Well, it did occur to me, but I decided to ignore the thought. He could've driven me somewhere far, far away—NO ONE would have found me, because those were the times before smartphones, and the chat room where we met automatically deleted conversations after you closed the window. I could have simply evaporated, and nobody would have been able to find a single clue to my fate.

He asked me to write down his number. He wanted to keep in touch because I was such *a nice guy*. I wrote it down, as I didn't have the energy to explain what a huge mistake the evening had been. I wanted him to drive me back. For the evening to be over. I was over guys and their penises, over my fantasies and over the way sex had been misrepresented to me. I wanted to evaporate. To disappear.

At home nobody asked me anything. I ran upstairs, made the bed, fell asleep.

I told Justyna that we had only kissed. Shame kept me from mentioning what had happened in the back seat. I still didn't understand what was going on, so I did what I've always done and will probably always do in situations like this—I locked myself shut.

He texted me. That it had been great and that I gave the best head in the whole world. That I was beautiful. That he wanted a repeat performance. That he'd never had such a good time with anyone before.

Sentences that will be repeated over the years to come, though never by me. Sex for years would remain something that I was unable to derive pleasure from, but only tolerated (or used) to achieve my own selfish needs. Yes, sex was my method of manipulation. It was mechanical, impersonal, and there was always that recurring thought—*let it be over soon*.

It's an interesting feeling—to get it off my chest. Not that the memory was particularly fresh in my head; I hadn't thought about it for years. Until I started writing tonight, I hadn't realised that this event was part of me after all. That it had happened at all.

I was (and still am) puzzled by this guy's motivation. A sexual proposition aimed at a minor? Why? What for? I'm not blaming or criticising him, I'm just curious. What can a sixteen-year-old give that no one else could? Was it simply horniness? A fetish for young guys?

He was kind. Caring. The best possible type of thirty-something who asks a high schooler out to get a blowjob in a car. He wasn't vulgar, and he didn't cross the boundaries that I, in a moment of clear thinking, had set. He didn't force me to do anything I didn't force myself to do. From his perspective, we were having a great time. Maybe he didn't even understand why I blocked him?

Body

My body is two or three years old.

I was always in my body, but I *was not* my body. I was me as Max-the--mental-being, but never as a Max-body. I don't think a person who hasn't been through this can understand. People who fit into socially acceptable sizes can't understand this kind of thing: they don't have the language to imagine it. Just as a non-addict won't be able to understand an addict—you get it at the level of logic, but not in your heart. We know that the thing is unhealthy and it destroys us, but that doesn't stop us from continuing the destructive behaviour.

For years I didn't allow my body to exist because I was convinced that it wasn't *mine*. That maybe I should've been a girl, because I liked boys. Because originally I was going to be a girl and my name was going to be Marta (the birth was certainly fun). I liked colours and had fantasised about having a boyfriend since primary school.

I wasn't gay. I was just in a *wrong* body.

Oh, how I dreamed that one day I would be able to go on a *real* date with a boy. That he would buy me something (at the time I thought that was the expression of true love—buying gifts), that he would be cheeky and slightly wild, introduce me to his family. Heteronormative notions, full-on. I wanted to be charmed and carried away by my knight in shining armour.

When I fantasised, and I did it always and everywhere, I didn't create a scenario of gay love. It was always about loving... me. My person, not my body. I was a shape, and even when I thought about sex, I saw the other man clearly, but my body wasn't there. Sex was a visualisation of *him*, not of me.

Then came a time that Freud would have been very pleased with, because I got a lot of satisfaction from forbidden love scenarios where I *revealed* to someone that he actually loved me (an apparent consequence of the queer media I surrounded myself with). And the poor boy in my fantasies suddenly understood that he wasn't attracted to girls, he was attracted to me.

Me.

Not that he likes men. He just likes *me*.

Waiting for Grindr

I've taken up the foolish habit of spending several hours on Grindr at a time. I recognise from the faces (or the photos of chests, landscapes or socks) that this isn't just my problem, but that I share it with a multitude of gay people in Warsaw (and probably in other places, too). Herds of people like me sit from noon till evening, evening till night, night till morning and... I'm not sure. Are we waiting for love or sex? Or just someone to talk to? Sometimes I don't know what I'm looking for there myself.

After a year or two of not using any dating apps, I came back to the same set of people and their photos—we were all still sitting there, or coming back after an unfulfilled dream of Prince Charming. Once, I even felt at peace about it. That I wasn't the only one totally failing. That there was a whole herd of us.

I've been vegetating on dating apps since I was sixteen or seventeen, i.e. for ten years. Some of them still have the same photos. Sometimes still as profile pictures.

There was a time, when I was barely out of high school, that I saw people who were over twenty-five, and was terrified by the idea that it was possible for a person to be that old. I don't think I even replied to messages from people over twenty-three back then. I thought, and please don't laugh, that life has two magic turning points—at twenty-one and twenty-five.

Twenty-one was the age when a person became *truly adult* (I'm rolling my eyes now, too), and twenty-five was the age when one's entire life would already be cemented and validated in the Office of World Management. I was convinced that life was then already at its pinnacle. That it would only go downhill from there.

So I'm glad that I still see the same people, because it means that they don't have their lives cemented either. We still sit there and refresh Grindr. We still look at who checked out our profile, we find that person, and then never write messages to each other. But when any form of conversation happens, unexpectedly—under any pretext (he doesn't put full stops at the end of sentences; he didn't understand my joke; or *he's a typical weirdo*) we let the conversation stall and fade for so long that it's stupid to come back to it at all.

And so the years go by.

To score with a white dude

Something I didn't realise when going to China was that I suddenly became a luxury item.

Just as in our culture there's this obsession about dating a Latino, or a person with Asian features, there's a big market for my white body in China. At the height of my career on dating sites I scored twenty to thirty conversations a day.

At first I couldn't believe the fact that I could be so attractive and for about six months I dated guy after guy, not believing my own luck. My body was attractive to young, old, bankers, students, business owners, waiters, radio voices, and also basketball players, teachers, businessmen and cooks. It seemed that everyone wanted a piece of the cake with my name on it.

I quickly realised what was really going on, and despite my strict system of filtering out anyone suspicious, I wasn't prepared for the possibility that most people writing to me just wanted to have sex with a white person. Of course, I knew that there were people who only wrote to each other with sex on their minds, but I never imagined that such a thing could happen because of the colour of my skin. Everything here was unimportant—my interests, my thoughts, even my looks. The most important thing is that I have a white ass and I'm ready to put it on display.

There's this trend of "thirty before thirty," or thirty things to do before you hit thirty. Normally the list includes skydiving or swimming with dolphins, but as my Chinese friend helped me realise, in China it's about having sex with a white person.

My initial fury was followed by a surge of reflection on how in Poland, too, dating foreigners is glorified. After all, it's *a well-known truth* that black people will have huge penises, that Hispanics will be gods in bed and Italians will be jealous but irresistibly attractive. I reminded myself that we also have a similar kind of prejudice and racism. That I myself was once on that side of the barricade—I wanted an Asian boyfriend and it really didn't matter to me what he did or thought. I might not have been after sex, but the intention behind it was exactly the same. He could've been anyone and I would still have had a crush.

Nobody wants to be treated like an object, but what do you do when others see nothing but your body? To my misfortune, I'm *very* white and *very* tall—a combination liked in Europe but absolutely revered in Asia, granting free lunches, dozens of requests for a photo together, and questions about whether I'd like to become a male model. Previously, I believed that to be a model you not only had to be pretty but also athletic, or at least fat-free, in order to get in front of the photographer's lens. In China, being tall and white was enough. That was the recipe for a career in modelling. It was liberating in a way because I could remain myself, but on the other hand I couldn't help but compare myself to *actual* models living outside this Chinese bubble.

Objectifying models is nothing new or revelatory. I guess each of us is old enough to be aware of these processes. We judge people in adverts, in magazines, on Instagram or the increasingly popular Tik Tok (which, funnily, is Chinese), we do it all the time and, on top of that, almost unreflectively. We're interested in looks because they're visual media. We don't care who that person is—their function is to satisfy our desire or visual needs. Film stars have had every inch of their bodies judged in public for decades, and I only had two years in China. Do I have the right to complain when in some professions it's almost a requirement?

The sex binge

The lack of contact with my friends due to the censorship of the Internet in China (no YouTube, Facebook, Instagram) + my underlying depression + imposter syndrome triggered by suddenly being called a *teacher* + not understanding Chinese and therefore also not being able to talk to

anyone (because hardly anyone can speak English there) brought me to the point where I was dating guys in a way I had despised all my life—meeting them for sex.

At first I was delighted with this power. After all, I, the eternal social outcast, not only had a proper take, but also had control over *when*, *where* and *with whom*. Only people with low self-esteem would understand what I'm talking about. Suddenly I was in the limelight, not ridiculed and criticised but wanted and desired. I had no inhibitions, no form of self-reflection. I entered the stream of life, and I was swept away by a river of possibilities. I experienced sex and pleasure that had never been available to me before. I set conditions, I demanded, I could choose between candidates. I was made of gold. I was a god.

Boredom crept in quickly.

The guys were all the same, but with slightly different builds. The sex was varied, but at its core it was based on the same thing. I wanted to salvage this with fetishes, but this only distracted from the problem that my diaries quite quickly highlighted—I was empty.

The feeling was familiar from the sine wave of depression, so it wasn't a shock in itself. The shock was that I found it right there and then. After all, didn't I have a great job with a fan-tas-tic salary? Weren't my friends great? Didn't I have a sex life that was wilder than I'd ever dreamt of? Weren't these men beautiful? I'd always wanted sex with beautiful men, and now I had more of it than my schedule could accommodate.

It's a curse of sorts—the fulfilment of all your dreams.

There was no chitchat, because I spoke no Chinese nor they any English. I'd like to make it sound like some romance novel and say that we found each other in the *language of love*, but that would be a simplification I won't risk. We didn't find each other in the language of love, because that language wasn't there. It was lust, and a lousy version of it. Men showed up, we had an awkward fifteen-minute talk with Google Translate, then there was sex, and then they disappeared.

There was a lot of it. A great deal. It started out as a once a week thing, and quickly turned into several times a week. Before I knew it, I was having several men in one day.

I'll never know how many there were because they all merge into one person, into a single intercourse. I feel ashamed, because wasn't sex supposed to be the final glue of a relationship? The most intimate way of being with another person? Am I slutty or liberated? Does sex even have any value anymore, in a world where there's free pornography at our fingertips?

Threesome

I don't know if I ever fantasised about a threesome in my head. Maybe for a while at the beginning of my stay in China? But the language difficulties were making life hard enough, plus it all sounded like *a lot* of work.

The one exception: some boy—I don't even have to make up a name because I've completely forgotten him—asked if I'd be interested in a threesome if he found another person. We'd never seen each other before, so the very concept of looking for a third man seemed a bit abstract, but Zhao, let's call him that, seemed to embody all my fantasies when we were chatting on the app, both in his appearance and behaviour—he was kind but also a bit different, charming but with a wry humour. The complete package.

Though maybe not, since he was looking for someone to complete the triangle?

Anyway. Our conversation went on for several days. When he found someone, he wanted to have a video chat with the person, because many people in China (but also in Poland) claim to be someone else and use other people's photos. And he, my knight in shining armour, did the job that I normally would have to do. And that's the best aphrodisiac: I felt taken care of, looked after—feelings not usually present in my relationships with guys.

He gave me the *where* and the *when*—about two and a half hours before my class. Due to the fact that most Chinese people prefer McDonald's drive-through type of sex I wasn't worried about the time. It might as well have been a hexagon, not a threesome, and I would still have arrived at school an hour before class.

The first red flags popped up relatively quickly. They didn't come at the agreed time, and only said they'd be there *soon* after I sent a text. Answers like that don't work on me anymore, so I ask for specifics. Thirty minutes.

I, like the moron I am, wait for these idiots, who then write again that they'll be late.

And so, all in all, we're an hour behind schedule.

They arrive. Zhao, my knight on a white horse, and the *other one*. He is supposedly crazy about Poles and Polish footballers (something that will recur several times, but usually only focusing on Lewandowski). Zhao quickly assumes the role of host—he looks over the bed, says they need to take a shower (it's very common in China to shower *as soon as possible* before and after sex), that he would wait here, and let our Footballer go and wash himself.

A feeling of unease fills the room when I'm left alone with Zhao. I'll never know if it's because I'm tall (many guys find this very stressful,

which only confirms to me how fragile the male ego is), or that I'm white (a valuable bargaining chip in China), or if it's just my irresistible natural sex appeal. Zhao systematically avoids my gaze, we chat about something, but the conversation is not flowing.

The Footballer finishes washing up and comes out of the bathroom. Already naked, ready for action. It will never cease to amaze me how easily and without any embarrassment Chinese men are able to parade around naked. I put this down to the open bathrooms (no walls inside, just toilets lined up in a row) in their schools, but not only there. In some shopping centres the men's bathrooms still look like this, although there are thirty-centimetre-high walls between the loos. I don't know what these are supposed to hide, since from the very entrance to the bathroom you can see all these men as they watch videos, play games, smoke cigarettes, and do their number twos.

Zhao goes to have a shower, and the Footballer is already getting down to business. My idea of small-talk has been set aside as a result of the washing machine operation performed by his tongue in my mouth. He leads my hands to the target location, so that I don't get lost.

No, I didn't refuse. I thought that was how it was *normally* done. That guys just get down to business and don't need anything else. The realisation of the stupidity of this thought will come much later, but maybe someone needs to hear it now? The fact that your penis doesn't get hard within two seconds of the first kiss is normal, don't let anyone tell you there's something wrong with you. The need for seduction, foreplay, a spark between people—this is a human need, not just a female one. You have the right to expect more. You have the right to want more than just sex.

Foreplay is an abstract concept to the modern Chinese person. I don't know if it's due to lack of time, desire, or knowledge of how these things work, but I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of times I experienced Chinese flirting. Here it was no different—pushed down by the Footballer's hand, I fell to my knees.

It felt weird, but I didn't protest. I still thought it was normal, as I'm a bottom in bed.

Zhao comes out of the bathroom. Still clothed. With a towel folded into a cube and a smile on his face.

I can still see the shock on his face when he saw what was happening in my living room. He was probably even more surprised than I was. Yet we both remained silent and proceeded to play the roles we had applied for.

The plot thickens, and my greatest fear is realised. What's always perplexed me about threesomes is how these people were able to reconcile

each other's airtime. How should I put it—I have only one backside and there are two of them, so not everyone can be exactly where they want to be. People explained to me that it *happens organically* and that *no, there are no problems with that*.

But there is a problem with that. Or at least I have a problem with that.

The most ridiculous moment comes when one of them starts to think it's some form of bargaining: *who will pull harder on my head*.

We move onto the bed, which I thought would settle things down a bit, but unfortunately the skirmish over my body continues. As often happens in China, everything is very spontaneous and hurried, so the guys start to penetrate me after only a few minutes. Strange fact, but related to this story—my body used to enjoy sex so much that I generally didn't need lube, even when using a condom. So I didn't have lube at home, and they didn't bring any (in China, the bottom is the person responsible for buying all the equipment for sex).

I'm aware that rimming is not to everyone's taste. I myself have resisted it countless times for fear of appearing ugly, unkempt or unclean to my partner. Now I know that the word was "unworthy." Because how dare I demand that someone take care of me and me alone? Anyway, it was thanks to rimming that I didn't need lube, so it was all up to Zhao and the Footballer, who didn't turn out to be very big fans. Another red flag, as the magic of rimming is that it's not just a preview but also a review of the sex to come. Don't ask me why, it is what it is: bad rimming = bad sex. At least to my experience.

Before I knew it, the first penis wanted to squeeze in.

A lesson for potential lovers—if someone's anus is clenched, it's not because of excitement, it's because of stress. Adding lube doesn't relax you, it just allows the other person to penetrate you *despite* that stress.

When they realised that they'd need lube to get in (the whole conversation was in Chinese, so I understood every eighth word), the Footballer left the bedroom and returned a moment later. I heard the click of the bottle opening, and a cool liquid spread over my body.

He went in.

However, a very familiar scent dulled that pain. Something minty and... blue?

The colour connected my synapses. My shower gel.

These guys were using my shower gel as a lube.

I needed about five extra seconds, because grasping absurdity doesn't come easily to me. *How the hell could they possibly consider this a good idea?*

I pushed myself away to the other side of the bed. I asked them both to leave.

There are many similarities between this situation and the one nine years earlier, when I was a jittery teenager in a stranger's car on the embankments of the Vistula River. I tell this story because by then I was twenty-six years old and this was the first time I'd said "no" to a man.

It had been nine years since my first sexual contact with a man.

Nine years of sex where it didn't matter who I was, what I did or thought.

Nine years of being treated the way I asked to be. The way I was taught that I should be treated.

Nine years of honestly believing that I deserved nothing more than what I'd been given.

Nine years of begging to be chosen by a man.

Oppression

The origins of shame

This isn't a story about how I became homeless at the age of fourteen, which is a shame as this would probably lend this post much more dramatic overtones. I was beaten at home for bad grades and behaviour, but that's no different from most of my peers.

I wasn't a diligent student and didn't try to be, and my parents didn't seem to realise that getting beaten for bad grades didn't improve the situation in the long run. But beat me they did. I told them over and over again: couldn't they see that this beating wasn't helping? They replied that they loved me and didn't know what to do. So on with the beating.

The real test, the real panic, only really started towards the end, when the violence and drunkenness of my father (hello, Edwin) got to the point where he was never seen without his pint of whiskey. For years, he drank every night. When I was a kid this seemed perfectly normal to me and it never crossed my mind to question it, but in high school it was hard not to notice. Especially as he became more aggressive with each incident.

The chicken curry situation

My parents' friends once employed me to do a night inventory at a Hebe drugstore in the centre of Warsaw—I still can't go into that place. A long and arduous job fraught with pitfalls, especially as it took place at night. Unfortunately, the chicken curry I'd had earlier wasn't planning to stay in my stomach for long. So I had to go to the back room every now and then

and try to get into the staff bathroom. Of course it was occupied non-stop, and when it wasn't, someone was in the next room. It was one of those wonderful bathrooms that seem to function only as a loudspeaker for even the quietest sigh of a sphincter.

So I was running back and forth, which was an open breach of the rules: they allowed no more than a ten-minute break (twice, for the whole night!!!), and prohibited sitting in groups in the back room. My lack of assertiveness didn't help in getting people out of the back room, so I shuffled in there about thirty times and still failed to shed the curry burden.

A few days later I found out that I wouldn't be paid for the job because the monitoring confirmed that I hadn't followed the rules. My parents' friends told my parents about it, and my father (in a drunken stupor) started yelling during dinner and asked me: *Do you think you're the one who deals the cards in this house?!* (I don't know how that applied to the situation but I remember him shrieking those very words), and then he declared that *you will never bring me such shame again*, and finally slapped me in the face.

I can't remember what I told people at school, but certainly not the truth.

The black eye was there for a fortnight, so it wasn't that no one had the chance to see it. Maybe everyone knew where it came from, so there was no point in asking? Maybe they'd got hit like that once too, so they knew.

I felt a curious kind of satisfaction as I looked my father straight in the eye. Did he see what he he'd done? Belt marks on a backside aren't visible, but the face... the eyes...

I don't know. There was no remorse or apologies.

But for years to come I'd tell myself that I deserved it because I wasn't strong enough to stand up to my father.

A good boy

That's why the next time my father got drunk and attacked my Mother, it was my brother that (very bravely) threw himself into her defence, while I...

I stayed in the room upstairs.

They were fighting with each other down there, and I was fighting... with myself. Should I have shouted? Should I have tried to fight? At least go downstairs and drag Mother away from him? Anything to help!

But fear kept winning.

Fear and shame of not being strong enough, manly enough.

I wasn't a strong guy. I wasn't brave. I don't know how to be violent nor do I understand violence, so I didn't know what to do when my own father was beating my family up. I get regular flashbacks to that moment

every few months, even though it's been eight years. The fear and shame don't go away.

I ran halfway down the stairs to help them, but when I saw my Mother screaming and crying as my brother tried to push my drunken father away from her, I froze mid-step.

What could I do?

What was I thinking? That I'd *actually* do something?

I went back to my room. I walked up the steps feeling that this was one of those decisions that would define me for the rest of my life. There are no words, and I don't know if there will ever be a word for the kind of shame I felt then and still feel now.

When my drunken father went upstairs, he stopped in my room. That fear... I'll never forget it. It's like in those horror movies when the murderer approaches the victim, you can hear his footsteps, and the camera zooms in on the face of the person who knows that it's over. Not only that he will die, but that his death will be horrible.

That's how I felt.

He came up to me and... patted me on the shoulder. With the stench of whiskey on his mouth, he told me that I was *a good boy*.

Honestly, how can you not have any daddy issues? How can you not have totally fucked up relationships with men? How absurd it that—to be gay and be afraid of men?

I will never touch whiskey in my life. I can't help but shiver when I say the word. I'll never cheerfully sing the shanty *Oh, whisky my dear wife/ you're the best lady there is.*[14] I will leave the room where people are drinking it. I'd have to puke if I accidentally drank it at a party. Whisky will never be an alcoholic beverage for me, or even a thing. It will be my private time machine that never lets me forget what it means to be *a good boy*.

The child on the floor below

Living in China, I've encountered domestic violence more than once. In blocks of flats, the screams of children begging their parents to stop hitting them can be heard even a few floors up. The instinctive (and learned) reaction of parents is to first scream at their children and then beat them until children understand how much they've disgraced their whole family.

I'm not saying that China is worse than Poland in that respect. You can just hear it better through the walls there.

14 *Whisky moja żono, jednak tyś najlepszą z dam* is a line from the highly popular song "Whisky" by the Polish blues-rock band Dżem, originally published in 1985.

For me, with each crying child I remembered how I was the one who begged god to make me disappear. To make my parents disappear. On teacher-parent conference days, I thought of jumping under the bus, of running away from home. Being beaten is torture, but waiting to be beaten is *a whole other dimension of fear*.

The sound of a child getting a beating puts my whole being into a state of paralysis. I'm in China and, a twenty-six-year-old man, I completely freeze and shivers run through my body. First comes the pain. A vivid pain, as if it were my own—I can feel it on my skin. I don't know what to do, because what can you do? Being beaten—my parents wanted me to stick my arse out to receive the blows. Even today, the sentence *take your trousers off* has a very different meaning to me than it does to other people—a flash of terror. Waiting to be punished.

When I couldn't take another blow, they would hold my hand and beat me as fast as they could—on my legs, on my back, just to get to the pre-determined number—ten, fifteen, twenty. When the punishment was over, they would go to another part of the house and call me for dinner.

Do you realise how it fucks up your head when the person who beat you serves you dinner a minute later? And then you sit around and watch a movie, as if nothing ever happened?

That fear and that pain still live in my body, so I run out of the flat and sweep through corridors, looking for the door from where the screaming and crying is coming from. I keep running. I wonder what I can do in a foreign country, with scant knowledge of Chinese. After all, they may not open the door, they may ignore me completely. I won't call the police (although I've tried), because no one there speaks English.

I pound on the door. I pound continuously, and the voices inside fall silent.

I hear the voice of a weeping girl, who surprisingly speaks a little English. And I wonder what it would be like to be a thirteen-year-old girl speaking English to a stranger from behind a door.

She cannot answer the question: *what's going on*? She apologises. She apologises several times, says that *they'll be quiet now. That she won't say anything*. That *she thanks me*, but *says good night*.

I go back upstairs. Bitter and sad, because what have I actually done? Has anything changed? Will she continue to be beaten, will they just force her to cry a bit less loudly?

I don't know what you should do in moments like that. I don't know how people are able to think clearly in stressful situations. I'm unable to. I remember my family home and the command: *take off your trousers*. I see

my father saying that I'm *a good boy*. I can see myself not being able to go into a shop to buy myself a leather belt for my trousers, so for years I've been looking for belts made of fabric. All I see is my greatest fear—my home.

Bobby's mother

My long-term boyfriend in China introduced himself as an openly gay man. He said his parents know, his sisters know, his friends know. I later learned that, as with many Chinese, his coming out involved one of the parents (usually the mother) threatening the child that unless the kid takes their word back, one parent would commit suicide. It's frightening to think of the scars that remain in the psyche of a child who has to go through such a thing. In China, mental and emotional blackmail is a fully developed art used on a daily basis.

Well, but back to my boyfriend.

We lived in the provincial capital, quite a large city (ten million people), and his family was two hours away from us by train. He went there for the weekend when it was the Dragon Boat festival, as most Chinese do. As we'd agreed, he was going to tell his family about me—they knew he was gay, but they didn't know anything about any guy he was with. In fact, he'd been planning to tell them for a long time, but he always put it off by claiming that *it was not a telephone conversation*. Which I understand, because it's not really a topic for a phone call. I didn't push and didn't say anything the whole time he was at his parents' house.

Bobby came back with two jars of Zhajiangmian sauce, which was one of the few Chinese dishes I loved. Two hefty jars. Bobby said his mother had made them especially for his friend.

What friend?

Well, yeah... Because he didn't tell them about me. *There wasn't... a good moment.*

You didn't tell them I'm your boyfriend, or that I even exist?

He doesn't know *if it's worth telling them about me at all. They would just get stressed out. Is it so terrible? I won't be visiting them anyway. They don't speak English.*

So I take it we're not envisioning a situation where I would ever meet your family?

Not now. Why don't we talk about it some other time? He wants to make sure that *I'm the one.*

Zhajiangmian isn't your regular ready-made sauce you pour out on a plate, and *voilà*: a dish is ready. With this sauce, you use one or two tablespoons per serving, so one jar lasts about a month.

Every time I opened the fridge it was like a needle stabbing me in the heart. It reminded me that for his parents (and in China, parents are really important) I didn't exist, or that I, at most, could be *a good friend*.

I didn't even exist by name.

There may be a hint of excitement when your relationship is a forbidden fruit, but that thrill fades very quickly. Irritation slips neatly into its place, because despite posting frequently on social media I never found myself there with him. Despite walking hand in hand with me around town and saying he *wasn't ashamed of anything*, there was fear in front of his loved ones. Or shame. Or both.

Anyone who's been in that kind of situation knows how awful it feels to be constantly censored and hidden. You have to create a whole new narrative for every event because you have to manually delete all the *dangerous* data—it leads to paranoia and schizophrenia. You have two separate lives that are supposed to be led by one body. This is supposedly physically impossible, yet queer people have been doing it to themselves for years.

Do others feel the same way?

My learned passivity in the face of this kind of behaviour was shaped over the years by school, where there was no room for a smartass like me. There was no room for questioning teaching methods (maybe that's why I went into teaching?), for inciting rebellion.

Our teacher in secondary school, a very nice woman but without any grace in her teaching methods, wanted to discredit me in front of the class because I couldn't give the proper declination or conjugation in German. When asked why I couldn't do it, I said it was because the material was boring and the learning pace was too fast (I'm sure I spoke in a more accusatory tone, full of entitlement, so I don't blame her at all).

She asked: *Do others feel the same way?*

Silence.

Nobody said anything.

Well then, you get an F, sit down!

And what happened after class? Almost e v e r y student in my class came up to tell me they agreed with me, but didn't want to make the teacher their enemy.

This is a learned behaviour—not reacting for fear of the consequences. Because when was the last time you had the opportunity to make a risky choice, and there weren't dire consequences? We aren't taught to take risks, or put another way, we aren't taught how to endure failure when taking risks. So why should anyone make life difficult for themselves?

We were taught not to have an opinion.

I was *taught* to be passive.

That dyke is on again

We don't come out to everyone. We claim we don't hide our orientation, but, at least in my case, I've often very consciously not revealed it.

I recall visiting a hairdresser's sometime around 2017/2018. There's me in the chair, the hairdresser and the owner of the establishment somewhere at the desk. A song by LP starts playing (it was probably on every radio at the time) and the hairdresser complains that *that dyke is on again*.

I came out six or seven years earlier and had promised myself then that I would always stand up for the LGBTQ+ community.

I didn't.

Out of fear... of what, exactly?

There wasn't a thug who would beat the shit out of me, there was no dark alley, there was no immediate danger. The worst that could have happened was a bad haircut, but hair grows back, right?

Funnily enough, I thought I'd outed myself to my hairdresser a few months earlier. Something had snapped inside me then and, like characters in American movies, I confessed all my troubles to my hairdresser—my relationship with my mother, the problems with my roommate, stuff about the guy I was dating.

God, how I braced myself to tell her about this boy. I was a supercomputer that could scan the entire room, every millimetre of her face, EVERYTHING that might indicate that my hairdresser was hostile to gays.

Nothing of the sort happened, and I was amazed at how little it affected her. At the time I was pleased, but now I'm thinking that maybe she wasn't listening to me at all? I guess that's the only option that makes sense. The other would be that gays are OK, but lesbians are eww? Weren't hairdressers supposed to be our guardians and godmothers? Good souls who would listen and understand? At least that's what I was taught by American movies.

The homophobia I live in

Have you heard this classic crypto-homophobic line: "I have nothing against homosexuals, BUT"?

I have nothing against gays and lesbians, BUT I find the marches irritating; BUT I don't like over-the-top gays; BUT I don't accept same-sex

marriage; BUT I don't want to see them kissing in the street; BUT they don't need to flaunt themselves like that, BUT they shouldn't adopt children; BUT they are a minority, so they should conform; BUT I wouldn't want my son to be gay/lesbian; BUT I think there are too many queer people in the media; BUT come to the wedding with an opposite-sex plus-one; BUT that's not how any guy should dress; BUT she's probably a lesbian cause no one has fucked her right; BUT a woman should wear dresses; BUT a trans man is not a man; BUT I don't like effeminate guys; BUT why are they so aggressive at protests? It doesn't improve their PR; BUT have you tried being in a *normal* relationship? Maybe you're not a lesbian at all; BUT men shouldn't wear stilettos; BUT why are all lesbians so oversensitive; BUT I don't want to read about it in the paper; BUT a man's/woman's goal in life is to start a family; BUT why don't you wear a dress to this wedding? BUT can't you for once keep quiet about it and have a nice evening with your family; BUT why do you have to make such a big deal about it; BUT showing it in children's films is a bit too much; BUT they don't have it so bad because my friend doesn't complain; BUT I wouldn't leave my child alone in a room with a person like that; BUT maybe don't talk about your partner at Christmas; BUT transsexuals are disgusting; BUT you can't be my children's teacher; BUT since they can't have children, they're just preying on the state; BUT what will people say, so keep it a secret; BUT you shouldn't discuss it in any way in your classes; BUT be careful because *they* transmit HIV; BUT don't tell the children at school about it; BUT he looks like a real faggot; BUT it is known that all gay people have been raped in the past so it's not their fault; BUT don't talk to teenagers about it because they'll get silly ideas; BUT could you act a bit more manly; BUT creating special rights for minorities is oppression of the majority; BUT it goes against my faith; BUT the other person has something against it, so don't show it off; BUT it's a bit disgusting; BUT in my day they at least had the decency to hide; BUT I won't do anything to improve the situation, because these aren't my problems.

A drop of live blood

We went to see a friend who performs a live blood analysis with my now ex-boyfriend and my Mother. Never mind the controversial nature of the procedure—in principle, the woman pricks your finger, puts a drop of blood under the microscope, and tells you what's going on there.

After we left, Mother took me aside and said that I'd touched my boyfriend a little ostentatiously and that she didn't want to say anything, but her friend had been uncomfortable because of the situation.

Has any straight couple ever heard such a thing? That they made someone uncomfortable by r e s t i n g t h e i r h a n d o n t h e i r p a r t n e r ' s s h o u l d e r? Because I didn't kiss him, I didn't shove my hand in anyone's pants, we didn't quietly have sex in the bathroom. I placed my hand on my boyfriend's shoulder.

Hetero couples who say "we have nothing against gay people, BUT" won't understand what we're going through, because the idea that their private affairs could make anyone uncomfortable doesn't fit into their worldview. And it's good that it doesn't, because it's actually kind of absurd.

But this is absurdity we live with every day.

Meeting the parents

It's the norm to get to know the parents of your other half.

This is not the norm for us. Changes are taking place, obviously, but the multitude of people living in the closet is still shocking, although not at all surprising. I have the privilege of living in Warsaw, so my perspective on the whole situation is certainly different from that of people living in other parts of Poland.

I don't hide my photo on a dating site, I don't give a fake name. I can show up with a guy in a restaurant (although I can't escape the stares), I can (of course if no one sees me, or if it's night time) kiss someone on the street. Sometimes I might even squeeze my boyfriend's hand for a while on the bus. But again—only when no one sees.

Straight couples have the privilege of asking different questions than queer ones. They won't wonder "*w h e t h e r* to introduce their partners to their parents," they'll wonder "*w h e n* to introduce their partners to their parents." Because it's natural, it's ordinary, it's obvious you introduce your lovers to your mum and dad at some point.

They don't have to out themselves in front of anyone, because they're obvious.

They don't have to be afraid to travel to Malaysia, where homosexuality is punishable by imprisonment, because they're obvious.

Hetero love, as long as it's not a mésalliance, doesn't have to be hidden in history books under the code of "good friends living together for 40 years." It's obvious.

No one is surprised that I come to a wedding with a female friend. After all, she's a woman and I'm a man. On the other hand, turning up with a man (and here it seriously wouldn't matter if it was an acquaintance, a lover, an escort) would cause shock and scorn. I would be accused of stealing

the limelight for myself. I'd not only be a pervert, but also a self-obsessed m e g a l o m a n i a c unable *to let normal people* live a single day without *flaunting his sexuality*.

What I don't think about

I don't think about a lot of the things that normal straight couples think about.

Not only do I not think about getting married, but also about having a child, which means I don't think about buying a flat with a good commute to daycare. I don't think about the biological clock telling me that I should have got someone pregnant by now. I don't think about how much I need to earn to save for all those nappies and doctors' appointments. I don't think about a loan for a house with a separate bedroom for the baby.

Not many people ask me if I'm going to have children. If I even think about having children, because, after all, I'm gay, and in Poland all I can do is destroy real Polish families, turn children into matzoh,[15] or create some ideology that threatens the whole country—at least for those things there are regulations in Polish law. At least the problem exists.

I don't exist.

Grumblings

I think I'm starting to sound like I pity or hate straight couples. Maybe there's a hint of truth in that, though I'd like to add envy to the mix as well. I'd be lying if I said I'd rather be gay than straight.

If we had any agency, each of us would probably, in the blink of an eye, turn into a *normal person*. I would swap straight away. I wouldn't think about it even for five seconds.

It's a boy

I found out yesterday that my brother is going to have a son.

This is worrying on many levels—our experiences in an abusive home with alcohol problems is one thing, but I'm more fearful of the parenting methods passed down through the male line of our family. My mother often says that you *can't pluck your genes out*, which is as reassuring as it is worrying. With the utmost trepidation, I observe in myself and my

15 The myth that Jews kidnap and ritually murder Christian children to make matzoh using their blood had been inspired by the teachings of the Catholic Church and served for centuries as the spark for setting off anti-Semitic violence and pogroms. According to anthropological studies conducted by Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, the myth is still passed on between generations (for instance, by way of phrasal expressions).

brother the biological traits we inherited from our father—his violent, impulsive and stubborn character. The combination of these traits alone isn't necessarily so terrible, but add in alcohol and the privilege that comes with being a straight white guy, and the consequences are both extensive and profound.

— He wanted a son. Well, you know how Piekarts are—says Mother on the phone.

— But what do you mean?

— Well, your father wanted one too. To have a son and not a daughter. A daughter can be second, but first a son.

What does that even mean? That a daughter is OK, but if she comes second?

Some higher level of male chauvinism.

At times like this my fears are compounded. Just a few words and I already recall how my father raised us to be (yes, I quote) *honourable gentlemen*. Demonstrating this honour himself through numerous betrayals, blackmailing, and beatings.

I often think, and some people with a degree in psychology will probably comment on this, that the real root of my problems with men is my relationship with my father. In unequal proportions the desire to trust him, as the person who gave me life, and the fear of being beaten, and then again—the longing to be a little Max who someone'll look after.

Sometimes the past tries to remind me that he supported us, but Mother did too. That he tried a little, but never hid his disappointment with me when things didn't go his way. That sometimes he could help, but only when he was at *the honeymoon stage* in the cycle of violence.

I am unable to love him. Now, I'm even unable to try.

I fear for this boy—the yet unborn son.

That everything will come full circle and our family will produce another lost boy filled with hatred for himself and the world. That their son will be another child who will plead for mercy while blows from the belt are meted out.

That no one will run up and start banging on their door.

That someone will run up and start banging on their door, and he will swear that he'll cry more quietly.

I'm afraid that he won't be able to defend his Mother when his father starts beating them.

That he will stop on the stairs, look at his drunken father, and then retreat.

That his father will call him *a good boy*.

I want to think that my brother will be different, but it doesn't come easily to me. I can't love him anymore either, but I can at least wish him well: hoping that he can manage to do everything our father failed to. That he understands how we have been hurt and how to avoid creating any further pain.

As for this boy, I don't know what to wish for, pray for. I'll pray that he gets everything I was able to experience only after leaving home—understanding and acceptance. That he knows how to love and be loved. That he can live without constantly apologising for having the audacity to exist.

I pray that he is not gay. That at least that burden is taken off his shoulders.

14

ANNA NADAR, "BUN" [I was born on February 21st, 1995 in Szczecin—a relatively large city, a provincial capital, and most importantly, located on Poland's western border. As I'm writing this diary I'm twenty-five, which means I'm a young person; nowadays I live a long way from Poland, in south-western France, so I can write and publish my memories without any constraints—without the fear of rejection by society, of possible threats, and also without worrying about the current socio-political situation in the land over the Vistula, the Land Where the Onions Blossom, as the people I lived among used to call it. I'm not wearing any labels—I have no use for them. As much as they help you find a name for who you are, they also serve to create groups, sub-groups, divisions, and break-ups within the community. However, you would probably find me somewhere within queerspace, within LGBT+. Somewhere inside the plus.]

Against the Grain

Early childhood

I remember very little from my early childhood. I know I was a quiet and calm child, the kind you could give crayons, colouring books, dolls, teddy bears, toy cars to and feel confident that they would take care of themselves in silence—just make sure they're fed. I was raised by my mother, who divorced my so-called father right after I was born, mere months into a marriage forced by an unwanted pregnancy. I lived in fear of my so-called father, even though I hardly ever saw him, aside from the odd nightly visit with security guards and a mouthful of threats. I was three or four when it happened. When I was of age, Mum regaled me with the story that I was "created" at a time when they were separating—she went to see him, basically to give him back his keys, but then somehow happened to sleep with him one last time. Let's remember this was the mid-1990s, so the context of the biggest city in the province doesn't really matter so much.

My mother was out of work for most of my childhood. My grandma took care of me a lot; she lived in the same neighbourhood. Our house was a typical, grey prefab tower block (which was insulated in the early 2000s and coated in pink!). I shared a single room with my mum. I never thought of the apartment we lived in as my home. It made me feel wrong, out of place, scared. It belonged to my so-called father, but we got it by decision of the court or some such. Throughout my childhood, I kept hearing we would move soon and I clung to this hope. I dreamed of having my own

home, my own room, one full of colour, but mostly pink. I often imagined I was living in a massive house, like a palace from a fable, with a bunk bed all for myself that had a slide down to the floor, where there were slides between all the floors, where there was a pool, a garden. Where I felt at home, where I felt safe. Every birthday, I wished for a home as I blew the candles. At the apartment, I waded in daydreams and made drawings; at my grandma's, I felt much more freedom and security. We made puppet theatres; we sewed dolls and clothes for them; we did all sorts of other things. Toys were for kids, none of that strict gender division between boys and girls, so I had both a Barbie doll and some toy cars I staged races for. I never wanted to wear make-up "like mum" or wear her clothes, as little girls tend to do—though I did like painting my nails on vacation: it's become a bit of a tradition.

Sadly, the relationship between my mother and her mother, otherwise known as Grandma, had always been tense and troubled. I don't remember a time when they didn't quarrel or trade insults, and my mother—a very difficult woman—took the lead. I was drawn into various kinds of ploys, like when my mother planned to go to a disco and had me tell my grandma at 9pm, out of the blue, that I was very sleepy and tired and that it looked like I had to stay with her for the night. I was a night owl, so going to sleep at 9pm was totally out of character. On the other hand, Grandma would ask me, for instance, what Mum was up to. My grandma is a very considerate person, warm, very loving, not quick to anger, and she eagerly took care of me, but I think she sometimes wanted to cut my mum down to size. In the end, we all want to live our own lives. At the time, Grandpa was working as a builder, which is not unusual given that he became a grandfather at forty-eight. He usually came back home in the afternoon, but there were times when he was out for weeks, like when he travelled for work in Germany, Norway, or somewhere else. Grandpa always took me walking in the nearby wood-and-garden areas (let's call them that; there were plenty of them around the Arkońskie district), where we collected wild strawberries, blueberries, apples, and whatever else we could find. Other than that, there was also my uncle, my mum's younger brother, who lived with Grandma and Grandpa sometime until I was midway through or maybe at the end of primary school. He worked on the other side of the street from the house and sometimes took me out shopping, so that I could get some clothes of my own—I usually wore my cousin's hand-me-downs (not that I had any reason to complain). Other than that, he had a PC, so we would sometimes play DJs using I don't know what programme, and I also drew in MS Paint. As a child, I had no friends my age, so I spent most of my time

alone, looked after by the aforementioned adults. I was afraid to go out into the yard on my own—I was (and still am) shy and found it difficult to talk to other kids. It felt good to play by myself; as already stated, I staged theatre plays, play-acted comic strip stories from the *Barbie* magazine, ran toy car races, drew a lot. Oh, and I also played football games on my uncle's PlayStation, though I had a somewhat original understanding of the game—for instance, I would do my best to score the most own goals. When other kids went up to me and asked "What's your name?" I ran off. My mother said I was acting like a savage. I was a textbook case of a loner, a recluse.

I first learned there was anything beyond the cis-heteronorm as a child, thanks to the fairly popular TV series *Sex and the City*. My mum watched it, and I sometimes joined her; at other times, it was there in the background while I was playing. Despite appearances, the series is about friendship, not sex, so my mother didn't stop me watching it or hide away somewhere while she watched it herself. One of the characters is Stanford, Carrie's friend, who is gay. Besides, Samantha has a relationship with a girl. That's how I learned about different preferences, and I remember not asking about it at all—I just accepted it as fact that this was what the world was like.

The most wonderful memories I have from childhood include trips abroad. Szczecin is just a few miles away from the border of Western Europe, it's a kind of window into the West. My mother was on the lookout for a boyfriend from the other side of the Oder, so I often travelled to Germany or the Netherlands, mostly to Heerlen. My mother showed me that the world can be different from Poland. I loved those trips, I loved those weeks spent in another world, a colourful, friendly, smiling world. I felt good there, safe. Astounding variety—and I don't mean sweets or jelly beans in the corner shop! When I walked the city streets, I saw this wonderful diversity of people—many different shades, different clothes, different kinds of self-expression. I liked how rich that world was and that it was all out there for all to see. Shops displayed their wares outside unconcerned with thieves. By then, I began to sense this disparity between Poland and Western Europe, but I couldn't quite pin it down, find the right name for it.

Szczecin being close to the western border also meant we could go to Germany very often, taking one-day trips to Berlin, Potsdam, and other cities. I remember seeing Berlin's famous Love Parade on TV—I liked the joy, the freedom, the explosion of colour; I longed to be part of it, even though I didn't know what it really was. It was colourful, it was about love, and that was all I needed to know.

Once I went to France, specifically Paris and Disneyland. The ambiance of the French capital amazed me, it was somehow alluring, invigorating. The city itself—very picturesque, noisy, with its Eiffel Tower that amazed me. I love scenic vistas, looking at a city from above, having it at my feet. That was the moment when I decided I would return, when I felt the desire to live outside of Poland, preferably in a Haussmann-style tenement house near that Parisian landmark.

Primary school

I went to school a year early, as a five-year-old, with other kids my age. My mother always thought kids in Poland go to school too late and waste their potential. This need to "not waste your potential" would follow me for many years, practically my whole life up to now. The school was a colossus in the Zakole district, housing kids and teens from kindergarten for five-year-olds up to the end of middle school. I didn't like it, mostly because of the incompetent class teacher who shouted at us for no reason, told us we wouldn't be allowed to play as punishment, and once locked me in the classroom because she didn't feel like waiting for my mother to pick me up when she was running late. I didn't go often, and when I did, I played alone. I remember a boy once tried to kiss me; I ran away crying. I still don't understand why grown-ups find incidents like this funny, play them down, don't stress the importance of mutual consent even with something as trivial on the surface as a peck on the cheek. When I was six, I began the first year of primary school in the same building, but constant stress led me to stop attending, after which I and others from my cohort moved to another school, then the No. 64 at Rayskiego Street. Before that there was the first-year pledge, when—to add an educational element—the kids learned important emergency numbers for the police, the ambulance service, and the fire department. The boys could choose to dress up as firemen or policemen; the girls had to be nurses, no choice and no pulling out of it. I remember feeling offended because I was assigned something I didn't like. In protest, I didn't say my part, but I don't think anyone noticed because we spoke as a group. I don't recall anything else from that school—I show no contrition and seek no reconciliation. My other one, the No. 64, was way better. I even befriended some boys and girls there.

Early on in primary school, at a time when kids often identify with the heroes of their favourite animations—girls with Disney princesses, boys with some warriors—I had no one to identify with. I didn't like the saccharine fables about princesses, those love stories all from the same mould, with damsels in distress rescued by fairy tale princes. I preferred

Tom & Jerry, *Courage the Cowardly Dog*, *Flintstones*, or *Johnny Bravo*. The girls from my class dreamed of fairy tale princes, weddings, and white gowns, but I didn't. I swore I'd never get married. I think I had a limited vocabulary at that age, but I already knew I wasn't cut for that world, that I was different. When all of your friends dream about the same things and you don't, something's going on. I wanted to be a singer, painter, artist. I was always sensitive to cruelty against animals, so I saw my future as a veterinarian who saves animals, caresses them, and heals them. Then, I learned that this wasn't what the work looked like, and since I tend to faint when having my blood taken and get queasy whenever I see injuries of any kind, I abandoned the idea. But I didn't abandon the dream of becoming an artist.

I was a quiet, calm, and attentive student. I liked school as long as it lasted, always had good grades, always did the homework. In my notebook, I marked every new lesson with handwritten patterns. I used so much colour that Ms. Lucynka,[1] the teacher for years 1 through 3, once told me my notes were beautiful but too colourful. Fond as I was of Ms. Lucynka, I couldn't wrap my head around that one. Looking back, I think Polish men and women simply love nondescript, monotonous colours. Grey buildings, grey skies, bland hues in clothing. Meanwhile, I always loved colours, dressed as colourful as I could, loved rainbow-coloured clothes and details, loved patterns. Dear reader, if you ever crossed paths with a loud dresser, that might have been me! Beyond that, I often wore all the necklaces and bracelets that I owned. I never liked rings—I still don't—and I had my ears pierced after the first communion, but at school we were forbidden from wearing earrings AT ALL; wearing screw-ons was a sign of rebellion. In terms of the teachers, that school was pretty nice; it was a different story with the directors, the parents' council, or whoever it was that introduced these restrictions and mandated uniforms way before they became mandatory everywhere—luckily only for a year, when I was in my sixth year. I treated the uniform as an assault on my personal freedom, a denial of self-expression, a greying of my world, the killing of variety and colour. While I did say back then that I hated them and that they were ugly, it was probably due to immaturity, lack of proper vocabulary or knowledge of the world around me—at that age, you're only just beginning to learn so many things. I was surprised by how many people

1 It is a long-established practice in Polish schools for pupils to address their teachers as *Pan/Pani* (Mr./Ms.) followed by the first name—a practice that is also reflected in public interactions outside of the school.

accepted the mandate, that they didn't seem to care. For me, it felt like being pressed behind another label.

Initially, I got along with the other pupils, but I quickly noticed that I had trouble maintaining relationships. Other girls formed into pairs or groups, but I never found a best friend of my own. The boys stuck with other boys. As a result, I usually sat alone, occasionally joined by a boy or girl who knew I was timid as a rabbit and would let them copy my answers. Mother kept telling me that was because I was gifted and a swot; she put a positive spin on those features, stressing that people like that were not liked out of jealousy, envy. So, I grew up believing I was exceptional, different, and thinking that it was due solely to my ability to learn what was being taught.

In the early 2000s the moral panics over "satanic and pagan rites" were still to come, so Ms. Lucynka organised games for us for St. Andrew's Eve.[2] Nothing out of the ordinary; I remember everyone being happy and excited, arguing about who would get married first, and which of the boys or girls would be their future husband or wife based on a pin stuck through a name. Me? When it was time to take off one shoe each and put them in line, carrying the last one to the front until it crossed the threshold (the owner would be the first to marry), I broke down in tears, got hysterical, and refused to participate in the game. My decision wasn't respected, so the class teacher took care of my shoe. I understood that my refusal didn't count, so I took part in the other games apathetically and passively, my eyes swollen with tears. The wax-melting resulted in some weird shapes, I can't even remember what they were like. When it came to sticking the pin through a heart that had names on the other side (of course, girls got a heart with boys' names, and boys got one with girls' names), I stuck it anywhere with no interest at all—I just wanted the day to end. The other kids and the adults didn't understand my reaction, but was it really so hard to respect someone's dislike for a game? If any schoolteacher is reading this, I have just one thing to say: if someone doesn't want to take part,

2 In Poland, *Andrzejki* (St. Andrew's Eve, night of 29/30 November) is a traditional time for fortune-telling, usually of the (heteronormatively) matrimonial sort. It is often observed at schools as a group event organised by the teachers. Aside from the game where the shoes of all participants are laid out one in front of the other from a wall until one of the shoes crosses the threshold (symbolic of marriage), another common tradition is spilling hot wax from a candle into cold water and guessing the appearance of the future husband/wife from the shape (or the shadow it casts). In the pins and paper hearts game, pupils put their names on the hearts and turn them plain side out; then, each girl sticks a pin through a random heart with a boy's name and boys do likewise with the hearts with girls' names. The object is to identify the name of one's future spouse.

respect it! You can ask why, though I doubt a seven-year-old will tell you anything beyond "I don't wanna" or "I don't like it."

Another trauma from school: Valentine's Day. Personally, I still detest that holiday and never observe it, even though I'm in a relationship. It's naked capitalism; if you're in love it's every day, not just one particular day in a year. You can show your feelings whatever day you like. Doing it on Valentine's seems pretty banal. So, there's probably a Valentine's Day postal service at every school on Valentine's Day. You put your card in and then postmen go room by room distributing them. I was always afraid I'd get one, but also felt excluded when everyone else did but me and a few other pupils, off-limits due to deficiencies of hygiene (at least that's how things worked in my class, but there are always excluded groups everywhere, just based on different criteria)—a mixture of thoughts and feelings this child was ill-equipped to handle; by the teens, I would learn to keep them at arm's length. I remember the excitement, the attention of others, curious who wrote the letter their friend got, the competition for the title of the most liked (since some got several cards).

But the school also had its wonderful moments. From the outset, I involved myself in the school theatre troupe; ours was called "The Little Green Grove." I loved to take on different roles. Play the rabbit? Sure thing! Grandma Balbina? Of course! I fell in love with acting back then and would long dream of becoming an actor. Theatre also gave me something else—it became a kind of way of life. As already mentioned, I was sometimes made to play-act even as a little child, and not always for fun. I now thought that maybe that was what life was about—taking on different roles. As time went by, I came to embrace this view more and more, especially in my teens, about which, dear reader, more will be said further on.

School is also the place where people are first divided into girls and boys, where there is strict observance of Women's Day and Boyfriends' Day. We didn't celebrate them at home, so my first encounter with them was at school. Questions of sexual identity aside, celebrating Women's Day as a seven- or eight-year old is confusing as heck. There's also a healthy dose of inequality there: a "woman" is an adult, mature person, while a "boyfriend" is a careless youngster. There's no Men's Day to go with Women's Day, and there's no Girlfriends' Day to go with Boyfriends' Day—there's just Women and Boyfriends. We're reinforcing the stereotype that the male is immature, can be careless, can remain forever a child or teenager, while the female has to be serious, mature, grown-up. Not only do we saddle kids with gender (after all, at school you're only ever a boy or a girl), but also with additional gender stereotypes. More than that, girls

are expected to be well-behaved and obedient, to like children and want to have them in the future, to take an interest in fashion and appearance. Meanwhile, boys can have fun, tease others, be interested in sports. If you don't fit these stereotypes, you're out of the society before you're even really in. That was the case for me. I may have been well-behaved and quiet, but I had no time for any of that and would say so openly, if tactfully. I was interested in rabbits—I got one of my own, named Speedy, early in primary school. I was always told I would start craving children and a husband, that the time would come where I would start looking for a boyfriend, and because of that, also looking after my appearance and the means by which one attracts the attention of the opposite sex. I once got a make-up kit, the kind girls often get. What did I do with it? I gave it to my mum! I never wore make-up, never wanted to, and when my mother asked me why, I told her I'd start painting my face when I worked in a circus. My other problem was adults' acceptance of boys' pranks, referred to as "horseplay." I wasn't particularly affected by it, but some of the girls in my class were, and I tried to come to their defence. I was an excellent student, so my teachers made it clear to me, though discreetly, that I should refrain from doing so. It's not like you can laud someone as an example for others and then publicly chastise them. I didn't understand; if someone is mean to you, pulls you by the hair or the strings on your uniform, takes away your things or scribbles all over your notebook, you had better tell them off, not smile back at them. That's another way we teach the next generations how "no" doesn't always mean "no," and that some can get away with more, and others with less, based on their chromosomes.

Early into the fourth year, I began to notice a growing division between girls and boys. I couldn't find my place there—it felt like I was outside both groups. People slowly began to discover sex and become fascinated by it, though they didn't go beyond nudge-nudge, ha-ha—exactly as immature as you'd expect. I had absolutely no interest in the subject; any kind of intimacy felt repulsive to me, revolting, and I refused to hear about it, think about it, talk about it, or see myself doing it in the future. I didn't understand the vivid investment in something that was so unappealing to me. Of course, the conversations in the school corridors only ever mentioned the sole acceptable configuration: a cis-heterosexual woman with a cis--heterosexual man. Even the thought of hugging a boy was appalling to me, though I did often hug the girls—but that was fairly normal among children. In spite of my love for dancing (I even joined a ballet club for a few years), I steered clear of school dances due to the constant recurrence of songs for dancing in pairs (you know the kind); sadly, mother made me attend

two class discotheques. And since my class was overseen by an eccentric, elderly music teacher, she would put on waltzes and other songs for dancing in pairs—no sign of Shakira or Madonna, even when we brought along their CDs. I picked a chair and sat through the two discotheques, waiting for mother to pick me up. Some of the girls enjoyed quite a bit of popularity at those dances, but others didn't, which resulted in sadness and tears. Unfortunately, my own sadness was again misdiagnosed as the result of not having been asked to dance, prompting the class teacher to encourage the boys to ask the girls that were still sitting down. Other members of the chair-warming brigade lit up, but I burst out crying and ran outside; I spent some time in the corridor and got back inside sometime before the end of the dance. After that, my mother gave up trying to make me go and decided that I was a weirdo. A while later came the first infatuations, girls from my class all falling in love, the boys dismissing their talk with laughter even as they wrote in the Golden Book of this or that girl that they loved them (may he cast the first stone who has never read through a person's Golden Book while writing in it themselves!).* Again, I couldn't fathom why the girls liked this or that boy, why they were all pining for Karol or Tomek. To me, they were just classmates I could talk to easily. I began to wonder whether you could talk yourself into that kind of a state. Maybe it's a question of willpower; maybe if you knew a boy, you just needed to want it, to think about it? I tried, but to no avail. The same applied to being infatuated with a favourite actor or singer. That never happened to me. I liked the art, not the artist who was foreign to me.

The girls impatiently waited for their bosoms to flesh out—each wore her first bra as a badge of honour, and competed with each other over who had the bigger size. I wished that mine would never grow and my wish was granted: I'm flat and I like it, in spite of the claims by many grown-ups, including my mother, that it would give me complexes. I never knew—I still don't—what leads people to talk others into believing stuff like this. I never wore a bra. An aunt once gave me my cousin's first bra when she grew out of it. I cast it into the depths of my wardrobe and never took it out. I put band-aids on my nipples to stop them coming out, sprouting up—it worked

* For all those outside of my generation: the Golden Book (*Złote Myśli*) was a notebook with a list of questions on the first page that you passed to your friends, who wrote their answers on a piece of paper and put it in the attached envelope. The assumption was that they would just reply to the questions and put their card in the envelope for the owner of the Book to read, but of course you could find a cosy spot and read through the answers of previous respondents. I never had a Golden Book of my own (what would be the use) but I was happy to give others my answers [author's note].

on one. I prayed for my childlike, neutral figure to stay the same, for my hips never to bulge out—and that was luckily granted too. Every girl also awaited the moment when she would "become a woman," have her first period. I still held out hope that it would never happen, but that wish was not granted and I've been visited by this misfortune ever since the sixth year of primary school. My girlfriends boasted about it—I hid it; they celebrated that day, and I cried. Mum congratulated me, and I couldn't understand why. Because I was now going to suffer every month? Because it made me feel horrible? Because it felt inconsistent with what I was, foreign? Periods weren't taboo in my home, so these reactions aren't about that. It was something natural, neutral. Hairs sprouting up didn't bother me until mother said I had to shave them because they looked gross and I would be ridiculed, until she ingrained in me the obsession with being smooth, hairless, exactly like the Photoshopped models from a hair remover ad. The outlook promoted by major teen magazines of the period, like *Bravo Girl* or *Dziewczyna* (Girl), was similar—I bought them for the gifts (as already mentioned, I love shiny things). They also included plenty of stories about how Judy couldn't go to the beach and mum saved her with a hair remover. My mother began to scold me for keeping my phone and papers in my pockets "like a boy" and demanded that I carry a handbag "like a girl." I couldn't understand why I should do something that didn't feel right, why I had to follow the accepted norms when they went against what I felt good with. I began treating life like theatre—maybe we're all just acting out roles? This helped me cope with all that was happening around me since the onset of puberty. The whole climate surrounding puberty is toxic.

I think that was the time that I began to notice my difference, which I initially viewed as an aberration—and when it comes to groups, any kind of difference leads to exclusion, even mere lack of interest in a given subject. I became more and more focussed on reading. I read anything I could get my hands on, whether it was a school reading or a random crime thriller with a cat protagonist. I also explored my creative and artistic passions, taking courses at the Palace of Youth in drawing and making jewellery or moulding clay.[3] I drifted further and further away from my community, but it didn't matter so long as I could read and draw in peace. No one bothered me; I may have been a swot, but I let others copy my homework or test responses, so no one had any reason to pick on me—if they did, who

3 Pałac Młodzieży (Palace of Youth)—the shared name of state-sponsored entities in major Polish cities providing extracurricular courses for schoolchildren.

would help them with their Polish or Maths? Toward the end of primary school there were more and more competitions, and my dear parent encouraged me to participate in the lot, which only made the wall between me and my school community higher. On the other hand, I remember preparing for and participating in the competition in Polish with elements of History as an enjoyable event: I learned a lot and found myself drawn into the subject. I didn't win, only making it to the final, but good grades in entry exams paved my way to the middle school of my dreams: Gymnasium No. 42 with the newly-created dual language French class.

Middle School

Toward the end of primary school, I thought that the fact that there was so little going on between me and my peers was down to my passion for learning, so it seemed logical that I would instantly hit it off once I found myself in a school with entry exams, a school for swots. I was right. As preparation, a French language course had been organised starting January the year of the exam; participants weren't compelled to take the exam or guaranteed a spot in the class, but they could gain some familiarity with the language and maybe meet some of their future classmates. I still vividly remember lying in bed having woken up before the alarm—my mother was no longer unemployed, so I was alone—and dreaming up my future self after high school: moving to France, becoming an artist, and joining the bohème in Montmartre. This middle school would be a major gateway for me.

I did, in fact, make friends there. Actually, a small pack of them—Marysia, Daniel, Jacek, and Ania. Our "ritual" was going out for a pizza and strolling through Kasprowicz Park. We talked about life, school, our families, our plans, generally everything. There was lots of laughter and positive energy; for the first time, I felt I had friends. I talked a lot with Daniel, we often did projects for school together. I once went to his place to lend him my notebook—I thought that's what friends do, but grown-ups seem fixated on infatuations and dates, so my mother assumed there was something going on between us. And it was just me having a proper friend. Maybe someone could explain to me how lending your notebook to a friend who was ill or broke his arm can be an act of friendship when you're ten but a token of love when you're thirteen? Especially when I always gave my notes to anyone who wanted them—Grandma taught me that you should always share.

I continued to find it easier to communicate with boys, though the girls from my class often confided in me and asked me for advice, even in

matters of the heart. I was always ready to hear them out, give them encouragement, help them find a solution. It's pretty bold to give advice on love when you have no experience of it, but they all liked it—maybe people just need to be heard without having to suffer through another person's tales of heartbreak or cold-blooded advice. I still couldn't fathom why everyone around me seemed to be falling in love: why Iza found a new love of her life time after time, why Iwona pined for a boy she knew from her neighbourhood, and why some boys and girls were always surrounded by a host of admirers (always cis-heteronormative). I had no idea what a handsome boy or man looked like. I still don't. At the time, no one even mentioned LGBT+, unless you count having a laugh at the island named Lesbos during a Polish class on Sappho's poetry.

My mother, aunts, and uncles constantly asked me (especially on my birthdays or holidays) whether I had a boyfriend, whether there was a boy I liked. My negative responses were met with incredulity; they asked further, "Don't you like Daniel/Krzysiek/Tomek/...?! He's so handsome, if I were your age...!" They kept saying it would change for me; then they began to treat me like a weirdo. My mum often said I was aloof because I didn't like it when people touched me or hugged me too much, and never forgot to complain: "And you used to be such a clingy child!" Then came the innuendos about whether I would remain as cold once I found a boyfriend/husband/partner, assumptions that I was alone because no one wanted such a weirdo—although another pearl of wisdom stated that "there's a beauty for every beast." Quite confusing and wholly unpleasant comments. At the time, I didn't see myself in a relationship—I took to planning a future where I would find the kind of work that makes you move every year or two, and then I would be able to blame my marital status on work, which should shut people up. Or else I could join a convent and free myself of all that babble and socialising. They wouldn't be asking a nun about her love life, would they? Then there was the aunt that expressed surprise at the news that I couldn't cook and didn't want to learn, asking how I expected to find a husband and what would he be eating—to which I replied that I wasn't looking for one and that there are always restaurants. The aunt was about forty at the time, I think she lived in Szczecin all her life. My grandma's sisters proved far more progressive and less intrusive. At least I had a cousin three years my senior who fell in love quite often and kept changing boyfriends, so anyone who felt bored with my love life could always talk about her relationships and boyfriends and leave me be. These questions were a primary reason why I didn't like taking part in any festivities with my family, even my own birthdays.

My mother had this obsession with periods. It began when I was in the fourth or fifth year of primary school; she had me take pads before I left home, even for an hour-long stay for dinner at Grandma's. I hated wearing them and didn't want them noticed by others. But I did wear them to avoid having to argue over them. Once the nightmare began, meaning me having periods, she made a note of every one and had me keep a calendar and collect them; she even showed me her expansive collection. What I needed a calendar for I cannot say. It doesn't even make sense medically because periods can be very irregular for the first two years. Mine continued to shift even after that time, so my mum, ever the hypochondriac, made me do the rounds of the doctors. And thus begins act two of this drama. I had to go to children's doctors, of which there is a limited number by definition—as few as one per province—so you couldn't just switch to another because there was no one to switch to. It began with a gynaecologist. The lady doctor began by shouting at me that I didn't wash myself properly (the visit was around midday, so I'd showered the previous evening), and of course proceeded to talk me into thinking I was anorexic because I was skinny. Every doctor in the country claimed I was anorexic based on my weight and figure. So what if that was just how I was built, if I was eating normally; so what if anorexia is a disorder of the mind, not of metabolism. My mother also refused to accept it, stating that I ate normal, regular-sized portions, and that I had always been like that, which did make the doctors tone down the narrative. Back to Ms. Gynaecologist, though: she examined me in a pretty painful way, forcing her fingers in along with the weirdest instruments, and concluded that I wouldn't get a period until I reached "the minimal period weight of forty-five kilograms"; I weighed ten kilograms less at the time, but that theory was her original contribution to world science. I left the room crying; the receptionist apologised for the doctor and said it was just the way she was. The best-qualified person for the job—yeah, right. My mum didn't give up in her quest to make my periods regular, so I was taken to endocrinologists, rheumatologists, gastroenterologists... Along the way, they found minor deviations on this or that measure, which is hardly surprising given the number of tests they had me undergo. Generally, wherever I went, I heard I had to bulk up because "Later you'll want to get pregnant and you'll come back here crying." When I put my foot down and said I didn't want to have children, they said: "Everyone says so, and then they want it and cry." And so, aged fourteen, I learned from doctors that my only dream, goal, and pursuit was to reproduce, and that if I denied it it meant that I simply didn't know what I wanted. Sometimes I think that in Poland,

healthcare for AFAB persons (Assigned Female At Birth) is restricted to making sure they're fertile. Interestingly, when the girls from my class declared that they wanted to have children in the future or were considering getting pregnant (in umpteen years, of course), no one questioned whether they really wanted it. It goes without saying that all those trips to doctors, readings about pregnancy, and focus on periods induced a massive discomfort in me, a desire to be rid of all that, and an even bigger wish that the periods themselves might disappear forever. Not only was I annoyed at having them—I also had to talk about it with others. It felt horrible. Once, when I went a few months without a period, I felt happy; meanwhile, my mother couldn't stop talking about it and kept digging for an illness. Or maybe my dislike of periods was strong enough to stop them? I don't know. In the end, the doctors found nothing.

My mum was disappointed that she couldn't go to the disco with me to pick up boys, that every trip to buy me clothes felt like torment to me, that I wouldn't wear make-up even if she let me. She stressed it often enough, adding that my friends would probably like to and that their mums wouldn't let them. She often took me out with her—to concerts, to the cinema. I liked going to the cinema, but I didn't always like what I saw. I didn't enjoy being at concerts of performers who I didn't even know, but every time I refused, she grew indignant and complained: "You don't appreciate it, and I'm working my hands to the bone here! Others would love to have a mum like me!" so I kept my mouth shut. I think she was also disappointed that I wasn't bringing any boyfriends home, though she often stressed that I didn't need to hide it if I had one and could tell her if we started kissing—to which I replied that I did not foresee any such exchange of saliva in my future. My face was pimpled in the extreme and I fully embraced my ugliness, my bloodied face. I didn't feel like doing anything about it; I didn't want to go to a beautician to suffer in the name of some artificial canons of aesthetics and beauty. Looks-wise, I followed a kind of laissez-faire approach; my style was "whatever falls out of the closet," which I painstakingly, if hastily, upgraded with jewellery of my own making. Most of my clothes were either hand-me-downs from my cousin or gifts received for birthdays or holidays, or else things my mum bought. Sometimes I took something from her closet and, for instance, wore a massively oversize sweater as a dress or tightened the skirt with a safety pin. I think I maintained a semblance of adherence to the norm by wearing heels.

My mum bought plenty of women's mags and one of them had an article about "white marriages." It didn't talk explicitly about asexuality, but it

made me wonder if that didn't apply to me, and I decided it did. I felt relieved that people like me existed and lived. I felt relieved that a distaste for sex as such, lack of interest in it, lack of attraction to other people wasn't abnormal. In the article, people remembered the rejection they'd faced, being singled out, being the subject of ridicule because it was assumed they must have somehow failed in their sexual lives—something I didn't care about, having grown accustomed to being called a weirdo. For this reason, I didn't share my discovery with anyone. I also didn't look for more information about asexuality—in any case, the computer that appeared at our place when I was in the fourth year was mostly used by my mum, who dived head-first into discussions on forums and various portals. My computer time mostly consisted of doing homework or chatting with friends using Gadu-Gadu, a web communicator popular at the time,[4] but because we lived in a shared room, it mostly happened on her watch—and she often wrote in my name. So I found my intimate space where no one else could see: in my thoughts.

Driven by my mum's ambitions, I joined a chemistry club and got involved in competitions. This had a knock-on effect on my social life: the amount of learning and the time needed for preparations, both at home and at school (participants in competitions were excused from classes during preparations), caused my relationships with my erstwhile friends to become loose, even to the point of dissolution; I began to slowly fade away from society. I devoted every moment to learning, which meant I had no time to learn about myself, to develop in other areas, even to follow my interests. I stopped attending art club meetings for lack of time. I was a hard worker; I can commit to memory any amount of knowledge, so I found success in competitions. This made my mum happy and compelled her to send me to even more competitions, leaving even less time for my peers. One friendship that blossomed at the time was with Agatka, a classmate equally excluded from society due to her passion for zoology, botany, and music, and a general tendency to live in her own world. I understood her lively interest in hamsters since I could also blabber on and on about rabbits, one of the things I was famous for in primary school. Emails about classes were increasingly accompanied by emails about the wider world, with reviews of and conversations about books, exchanges of opinion, observations. When I got back to class, I spent a lot of time with her and we became friends. Our friendship lasts to this day and is

4 Gadu-Gadu—a Polish instant messaging app developed in the early 2000s, which enjoyed its heyday in the ensuing decade.

incredibly valuable to me. It allowed me to realise that I could still form relationships with people.

In my first middle school, I still attended religion classes because they were taught by an amiable young deacon. We sang songs, he told us a bit about the life of priests, about sacraments. Back then (school year 2008–09), there was no hullabaloo over LGBT+ and abortion; instead, there were sects and exorcisms, so once he put on a film that was actually more funny than scary. He spent most of the time asking us who we would like to become in the future. He let us have classes about subcultures, where we could talk freely. Once we even talked about satanists. Religion in general was a kind of loose class where you could do the homework you forgot about, cram for a test, or watch a film. In addition, it raised your grade average because everyone got a 5 or a 6.[5] Afterwards, he took his vows and was moved to the other end of the city, so starting in the second year we got an older lady catechist who was also a Catholic sexologist. I dropped out after a few classes; she was quite terrifying, with some kind of negative energy. Besides, she treated religion as a fully-fledged class, and I didn't feel like adding Biblical Studies to my already extensive curriculum, so I dropped out. I wasn't the only one in the school to absent myself—several other people didn't attend, whether due to atheism, differences of denomination, or lack of interest. Afterwards, I only knew what my gossiping classmates told me. Once, they had a discussion about homosexuality and some negative statements came out, to which Daniel asked how that squared with the day's reading about respecting others. The catechist decided there was no time for such discussions and they were done with the subject. On another occasion, a question was asked about the position of the Church with regards to a person whose life is endangered by pregnancy, and who ought to be saved in such circumstances—the adult or the dependent foetus? Here, too, the catechist opted to end the discussion and move on to another subject. She also taught my class in high school, at which point she switched gears to Family Life Education, but no one took that seriously. The cards she distributed, listing the duties of a husband to his wife and of a wife to her husband, provoked ridicule. Agatka showed them to me and I couldn't stop laughing myself. They included real gems, like "A wife should bring her husband his slippers when he comes home" or "A husband should caress his wife when he comes home; he should caress her at least twice a day." Agatka decided she showed more love to her dog. I can't say if the catechist really

5 Top marks in Polish schools.

thought she would be taken seriously, but many of her lessons followed this pattern.

English Advanced

Every year since the start of middle school, I spent a month of vacation at the local Empik Language School doing an intensive English course because my mum stressed that I needed to know the language, and the teacher in our class wasn't particularly demanding. After the last year of middle school, we knew we'd be getting a new one in high school because our previous teacher picked the less advanced groups and I was about to join a nature class that had English in mixed groups. At Empik, I intended to take a course in Spanish, but, by some twist of fate, the group never formed and I was offered instead an English course in a virtually individual setting, since there was only one other participant. On the first day, I walked into the room before the lesson and readied myself for it, when I saw her—a most astonishing figure. She was brimming with an awesome charm; she had a lovely smile and she wore a black top and a jeans miniskirt. I couldn't resist her shimmering aura. I remember she stood up and walked to the other end of the room to open a bottle of water because there had been a minor accident during the previous lesson where the contents of a bottle ended up on the table and clothes—ah, those fizzy drinks! There were other people in the room, none of whom would reappear (barring the teacher, of course!). Starting the following day, I took to arriving at Empik early, sometime after 4pm, even though the class met at 5pm, holding out the hope that Kasia might too. And she did. I didn't know what it was that made me act this way, but I felt I had to. It quickly transpired that we had a fair bit in common—we both took part in chemistry competitions. The differences were more plentiful: I looked like a little hippie, and she like a metalhead. I was one year her junior and was only about to go to high school in September, and Kasia had just finished her first year in High School No. 2, which was renowned for its bio/chem/phys class and chemistry teaching. I mostly listened to old-school and indie rock and knew nothing about metal bands, had never heard of Iron Maiden, but still, for some unknown, irrational reason, claimed to know a song she put on for me, even though it sounded like a massive crackle. Kasia was a member of the Brotherhood of Little Feet (Bractwo Małych Stópek); I thought it was some informal group for people who liked or owned small feet.* She was anti-choice, and I was pro-choice. We immediately hit it off; she often

* In case it isn't immediately clear, this was an anti-abortion group [author's note].

treated me to dried apples, which I liked so much that we munched them pretty much all the time. In spite of our occasional differences, we didn't argue—we exchanged opinions, discussed them, and moved on. The lessons themselves passed with astonishing speed. We exchanged our phone numbers, Gadu-Gadu IDs, and Facebook profiles, though I let her know I didn't use the latter too often.

My mum always looked up new acquaintances; the Internet was her resource. Already after a few lessons, she found out that my new colleague was "merely" a finalist in the chemistry competition and that her mother lectured at the West Pomeranian University of Technology (ZUT). She also located the high school she attended, and used the knowledge to try to persuade me to switch schools. I didn't want to: I preferred the freedom and chilled atmosphere of my school to the competitiveness of HS No. 2.

High School

In 2011 I started going to HS No. 9, which adjoined my middle school. The new school year had come, and with it the time to meet my new class. I somehow managed to learn their names, but I didn't delude myself into thinking I would integrate with them. Most of my previous class chose the French programme; only a handful joined the nature class, but Daniel was among them, so I had someone to spend breaks with and sit with in class. Due to my participation in chemistry competitions, I was virtually absent from November until April, spending whole days in the chemistry lab and only attending tests and submitting written assignments. In April came the Easter break and middle school exams; then came May break and the finals week.[6] It doesn't take a genius to realise that I had limited contact with my class. Besides, it often made more sense to me to walk over to the room where the B class sat and spend the break with Agata. I occasionally talked with Kasia by text or by phone. I suggested we go and see Pedro Almodóvar's *The Skin I Live In*—I love that director! The film touches upon issues of trans identity, as does the cult classic *Bad Education*. Emotional, surprising, and with a hint of mystery about it, it made a massive impression on me, though the question of being trans drifted somehow into the background, barely noticeable—even as it's at the heart of the plot! Kasia was a bit taken aback by it; perhaps it touched upon things she was already puzzled by? I had seen *Bad Education* sometime during

6 In Poland, Labour Day is celebrated on May 1st and May 3rd is a national holiday commemorating the passing of the Constitution of 1791, making the first days of May a traditional time for brief excursions. The first weeks of May are also the period when high school final exams are usually scheduled—children from lower years typically have that time off.

childhood, perhaps while in middle school, and I didn't notice the transsexuality then, either. It was only when seeing the film again, barely a few months ago, that I understood it. We met again in November, during the first stage of the Chemistry Olympiad—both of us being participants—but we couldn't get through more than a few sentences before the competition started. A month later, we met at the next stage. There we had more time to talk, though the first thing I was made to talk about were my "horrid Emu slippers," which were the condition of my participation due to a cold. We traded texts more often now and sometimes chatted on Gadu-Gadu (though my mother would occasionally write in my place).

In the end I was invited to stay overnight, as a friend. I boarded an old cross-country bus—I didn't even know how to validate my ticket because they used those tiny punchers. I kept my cool during a roller-coaster ride, and when the sign for Kościno showed up, I asked to be let out. I got off, the bus moved on, and there I was, looking at a sign showing "Dołuje" to the left and "Kościno" to the right. Maybe I got off too early; my calls went unanswered, so I just walked ahead. I asked a passer-by if I was headed in the right direction, which they confirmed. The road was pothole-ridden and muddy, since winter in and around Szczecin means mud and rain or snow-rain, which is what I call this peculiar type of precipitation. I walked on under a thick canopy of trees, into darkness, though it was still daylight. I saw the bus turn around. Alrighty then, let's just move along. The trees ended and some PGR buildings loomed ahead.[7] I finally came through on the phone.

"Where are you?"

"Well, I got off by that sign and you weren't there. I thought I got off too early, so I walked ahead. There's this old, low, brick block here..."

"You went to old Kościno!"

"Huh?"

"You have to turn around, I'll meet you on the way."

So I did turn around, and we did meet on the way. It turned out I got off in the right place—the bus stop is a few hundred yards away from the house—but my host forgot their phone and only realised when they were at the stop. But I made it. We sat alone inside all day, only going out for a quick walk with the dog. I gobbled half a tray of cake and some pancakes. We listened to music (I finally got to hear Iron Maiden) and talked

7 PGR, Państwowe Gospodarstwo Rolnicze (State Agricultural Farm)—a network of collective agricultural enterprises operated by the state in the People's Republic of Poland, which were dissolved and often abandoned after 1989.

until late. We never ran out of subjects; time flew past like crazy. Eventually, we had to go to sleep and I was led to an adjoining room. In the morning, I remember noticing the sexy butt and hips that seemed to move to the rhythm of a song, suggestive of something alluring and invigorating. Sadly, time came for me to go back. From that point on, we spoke with each other more frequently, but the tight competition schedule didn't allow for more meetings. For the first time, I felt like I was someone's best friend—and they meant the same to me.

A few months later I made another visit, but this time her parents were in, as was her younger sister. Of course I went there dressed in a flowery blouse, which her parents didn't like, as I learned afterwards. Her father tested me on Latin quotes while making pancakes; I knew them all, having recently passed Latin tests at school, but I ran out of luck with the Lord's Prayer in Latin. A fairly original and unusual way to get to meet your child's new friend. The man seemed cold; my intuition told me to stay away, suggested that I steer clear of him, avoid discussion. At that time, I had no idea what triggered the response. It was only later that I learned her parents belonged to the ultra-conservative Brotherhood of Saint Pius X, often viewed as a sect. Luckily we could lock ourselves in a room and talk freely, which we continued to do deep into the night, even early morning, in hushed tones. I remember her confiding in me about the complexes she had over her hips or thighs—at the time, I thought it was mundane teenage drama. I remember I woke up early and, not wanting to wake anyone up, sat on a chair and admired the beauty of that person, how beautifully and peacefully she slept. I went there a few more times, and each time I wanted to run away as fast as I could from that house that gave off an evil vibe, but I also wanted to stay as long as I could with the person I'd come to visit. The person I came there for.

During our conversations, I discovered the degree to which fate had been leading us to one another since we were small kids. One of my earliest memories from childhood is that I'm sitting on top of a slide over a ball pit at a KFC gazing intently at something and suddenly someone pushes me off. That's also Kasia's memory, only she's the person that's doing the pushing. Another crossing of our paths: when I went away for vacations, I left my rabbit with a pet store lady. Speedy wasn't a socialised pet—she was distrustful and could even bite. Kasia frequented the same pet store, and Speedy let herself be petted by her, even went over of her own accord. It couldn't have been for the physical similarity because I was much smaller than Kasia and had blonde hair (hers was brown). After that, we lived practically side by side, separated only by a little neighbourhood of small

houses; she often passed through there while walking her dog, but I never went out into the yard. Now, chemistry happened.

Our schools were within about 10 minutes walking distance from one another, including 5 minutes at a traffic light, and there was a 15-minute difference in break times, so I was often picked up after class or at least visited during the breaks. For my part, I left for 8am even when lessons began at 9 and we spent that time at HS No. 2; when the bell rang there, I went out and made it on time easily. Kasia didn't like some of her classes, so she would sometimes skip them and we wrote sick notes. She always mocked me for being so obedient and never skipping class. That's how I was. Her school was the place where I finally met LGBT+ people, specifically two gay boys: Kamil and Janek. They weren't a couple, at least not that I know of. Ever since I met them, a kind of social breakthrough began for me—these were people I could easily communicate with and feel safe and fully relaxed around. I didn't see them often, but it was always a pleasant time. I never felt as relaxed with cis-heteronormies—they always made me feel tense, alien, and I couldn't see why. It's something beyond knowing if you're cis or non-cis: even when I didn't know it at first about the people I met, even when I didn't know it about myself, I got along better with non-heteronormative people. Weirdly, when I talked with them, it was about the same things I talked about with anybody else—we didn't talk at all about our sexual preferences or identity, just the common, everyday subjects like school, books, or films, or else we discussed events around us.

Chemistry was a good excuse to spend time together. From my mother's point of view, the connection was advantageous because we had shared interests and because it offered an opportunity to get into the world of science. During vacations in 2012, we spent several weeks together at the ZUT, where a doctoral candidate helped us complete a project for the competition. A lot of the stuff made itself—you just had to wait for it—and that gave us an opportunity to hole up in a corner and talk. We completed one another to a turn: I didn't like working in the lab, and Kasia did, so she dealt with most of the dirty work, and I made the notes. We wrote the text together, but I did the editing; I like to write and edit, so I enjoyed the work. We mailed in our work and after a while news arrived that it had been accepted. I was happier about the prospect of spending a few more days together than about making it into the final.

There's this event in Szczecin every August called Pyromagic. Over the course of a weekend, there are firework shows every evening at Łasztownia, accompanied by live music. It attracts a hefty crowd. This was the first time I went without my mother and with Kasia, since her birthday

was around that time. We met way ahead of the event and ate muffins together, then walked a bit and started looking for a good spot. We found one on the slope of the Chrobry Embankment and sat down. I get chilly, so the cool afternoon soon made me feel uncomfortable. In spite of my general aversion to closeness and touch, Kasia hugged me and we sat together under her jacket. I felt much warmer that way. We began to joke about being taken for a couple, that someone would take a picture and put us on the cover of a rainbow mag. It made us laugh. We didn't yet know certain things about ourselves, but perhaps we had some premonitions.

While in high school, I became an avid reader of erotic novels, the first of which were Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* and *Tropic of Capricorn*. Then came various titles by Philip Roth, Anaïs Nin, or Michel Houellebecq. I read most of the latter's novels, even though his erotic descriptions get old after a while, repetitive. How many times am I expected to read accounts of sexual relations between cis-heteronormative people, in pairs or triangles—especially since they are fairly naturalistic, dry, bereft of intimacy, closeness, without consideration for internal experiences. Miller wasn't a captivating read, and Roth's novels drew me in not with their erotic sub-plots, but with the intensely interesting and engaging stories of his alter ego, Zuckerman, and the Jewish world of New Jersey. To him I owe my interest in Jewish literature. Nin had some lesbian sub-plots; her works are more subtle, tender, emotional. None of these books made me physically aroused or set my mind to conceiving fantasies of my own; I read them the same as any other book, with or without erotic sub-plots. On the other hand, I was moved by a film entitled *The Chinese Botanist's Daughters*—an exquisitely subtle, emotional tale of forbidden love between two girls who gave in to a feeling in spite of the price they knew they would pay for it.[8] As much as I still regarded myself as an asexual person back then, this film moved me to tears; this hadn't happened before and was not due solely to the film's ending, but to the entirety of it.

Being in the nature class wore me down; I disliked biology as much as I did physics, and learning the required material ate up plenty of the time that I could have used on preparation for the competitions. I used that argument to talk my mum into letting me transfer to the French class, which I did shortly before the second year. The school year began with a class trip to France. In spite of being back among my school tribe, I struggled

8 *The Chinese Botanist's Daughters* (2006, dir. Dai Sijie) is a French-Canadian drama film set in late-20th century China (though, because it discusses a homosexual relationship, it had to be filmed out of the country).

to reintegrate, catch the rhythm of the class. Most of my free time was spent on lonely walks and conversations inside my head. I thought (and I still do) that we developed a kind of telepathy. We had to put off calling and texting one another because of roaming charges. During the trip, I often talked to her inside my head, wishing that she could be there with me. Once back home, I repacked my travel bag and went off to the train station, as we were going to Lublin together—along with other pupils from Szczecin and my chemistry teacher—for the National Forum of Young Chemists. We travelled by sleeping car that was so thoroughly cold that the idea of huddling together under one blanket seemed fully justified. It took a bit of effort since I was a massive hug monster and Kasia avoided physical contact. When we reached our destination, we volunteered to share a room. There were two other girls in the room next door and we had a common bathroom, but that was as far as it got for our interactions. If you've ever travelled in a sleeper train, you know there's no way to get a good night's sleep in it—we had to take a nap after arriving. Then we went out for a pizza and got peace sign earrings along the way—a pair in green and another in blue. That night we went to sleep in separate beds, but that soon changed. I woke up in the middle of the night because the light was on, and when I looked around, I saw Kasia making tea for herself—she couldn't sleep. I told her to lie with me and go to sleep because there was an early morning ahead. She did as I told her, we embraced, and I quickly dozed off. We slept together after that and left the other bed for the jumble, meaning all of our stuff. I still remember opening my eyes one morning to the sight of a breast, so slender, so delicate, subtle, gently lighted by the rays of a new day's sun. I felt warm inside and closed my eyes. All through the lectures we wrote notes to one another, and this continued during poster presentations, since the attendance was pretty much limited to other participants, their legal guardians, and the organisers. In the evenings, we locked ourselves in our room and talked, shared friendly embraces, and helped one another deal with the anxieties we got from our parents. We didn't feel like joining the boozy integration with the rest of the crowd. On our way back, we travelled by a day train, sharing a compartment with a teacher from another school who seemed flustered. Well, we did spend most of the time slumped over our seats against each other. I still remember the look on the face of a girl—a former pupil at my high school who'd tagged along on the trip for company—when she saw us: her jaw dropped, and she almost fell over at the sight!

Soon after that we got the chance to spend another night together, this time at my grandma's. We were going to the theatre on a Sunday; the

regional bus service closed down rather early, and Kasia didn't feel like going home anyway. Since I was already on her parents' naughty list, she told them she would stay overnight at someone else's. You might well ask, why sleep over at my grandma's? Well, that's down to the fresh memory of a full-on assault on the doors to our apartment by my so-called father. My mother also went away for the weekend to her then-boyfriend's and I was simply afraid to be left alone at home. Besides, my home was in "constant redecoration" mode—which is what I called it to justify why I didn't invite anyone over. (In reality, it was due to the peculiarities of space within our apartment.) My grandma had no problems with that: she made us supper after the theatre and went to bed with Grandpa, and we took the guest room. Grandma herself decided we should sleep in the same bed, under one cover—whether out of her grandmotherly intuition or experience, since she had slept in one bed with her sisters as a child and then with other girls during sleepovers. The next day we ate breakfast, packed our lunches, and went to school. When I visited my grandma next, she told me: "She's a big girl, and you're such a slender thing, Anulka, you should find yourself a smaller friend because you look like Laurel and Hardy—one big, one small. And you should look good together in a shop window!"

We soon got another opportunity to share a bed, on New Year's Eve 2012. Kasia's parents and sister were visiting some acquaintances and by some miracle she managed to convince them to let me come over. They already disliked me, although I have no idea why. You'd have thought that a well-behaved, diligent student would be the best friend a parent could hope for. Whatever. Her mother made us some snacks and they went. We spent the evening talking and watching films, hugging on the couch. We watched *Elementary Particles* and *Włatcy móch*.[9] The former is an adaptation of a novel with the same title, but it doesn't do justice to the book. At midnight, we went out to watch the fireworks, and then we went to sleep in the same bed, with the door locked and the alarm set for safety. We slept in one another's arms and awoke to the sound of the phone—the parents called to let us know they were on their way back, so we hastily dressed, made the bed, and opened the door. In a word, we did

9 *Elementarteilchen* (*Elementary Particles*, 2006, dir. Oskar Roehler)—German drama film adapted from the 1998 novel by Michel Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*. *Włatcy móch: Ćmoki, czopki i mondzioły* (Lordz o' Flys: Inbreds, Halfwits, and Mongtards, 2009, dir. Bartosz Kędzierski)—an animated film about a group of dysfunctional children from a run-down school in a Polish city, a companion piece to a popular TV series which aired from 2006–2011 (also the work of Kędzierski).

all we could to make it look like this was a friendly sit-down on a bed for some chit-chat. It worked, no one saw through it. These were our secrets, we never told anyone how close we were.

In February, my mother began to resent our relationship because, in her opinion, it made me "fail the olympiad," since I didn't make it into the final and thus forfeited the chance of making her dream come true and becoming a three-time laureate. She came after me big time, forbidding me from spending so much time talking to Kasia. It didn't matter that I had gone so far in other competitions, that our work had got through to one of the finals. That was not enough. Already at the time, I think even since the last year of middle school, I only participated in the competitions for my mother, praying each time that I would finally make it and she'd finally be satisfied. Of course, I played the part of the happy and involved competitor for her. Sadly, she had come to believe I was spending too much time listening to and solving other people's problems and too little time learning—and that in spite of the fact that I always came directly home from class and went straight for the textbooks, that I spent my weekends in the chemistry club or doing the readings. Kasia could talk freely when walking the dog; my freedom was somewhat more limited because I could only call her from my mother's phone, talking to her from a kitchen without a door because I had no room of my own. The only doors that were ever locked in my home were the ones leading out, and that seriously curbed intimacy. Our private conversations happened over text—I had an unlimited programme. With time, I started making use of Facebook and moved some of our conversations there. Gadu-Gadu, the popular communicator, didn't work well with the phones of the day (it was before the smartphone era!) and Facebook did. That's where our most private chats took place. She often set her status on Gadu-Gadu to "invisible" and wrote "good night" to make sure my mother didn't watch, and the conversation moved to the other channel. It's hard to talk when both sides are denied privacy or when it's seriously limited, but we made do.

Quite soon afterwards, in March, we found some time for ourselves. Even a single day clawed back during a competition trip was an immense gift. One of those trips took us to Poznań for all of one day. We would get hysterical for no reason, or hold a conversation just by looking at one another. Thinking back, I feel like my chemistry teacher saw that something was going on between us. Our next trip was the one to Warsaw, where we would present the project we had been working on throughout the vacations. My mother squeezed in as a chaperone, but luckily she had

a boyfriend in Warsaw at the time, so whole days passed without us seeing her, occupied as she was with the guy. We had all of those three days for us. The presentation went smoothly; we spent the evenings in our room, cuddling and talking. It was then that I came to appreciate the unusual room setup in Ibis Budget hotels—two beds stood side by side; no way out of sharing a bed. Both before and during the trip, I was beset by a desire that I had not felt before, that we should kiss. I had no such experience up to that point, but that wasn't what compelled me: it was just because of where our feelings and our relationship were. I couldn't bring myself to suggest that we kiss, and even more so to just do it. We finished third in the competition, which meant a money prize, though neither of us saw any of it. Well, Kasia did, in a way, since it funded a part of her laptop. She didn't have a bank account of her own, so the money went to her parents. As for me, I did have an account, but my mother managed it. Back in Szczecin, we gave an interview to a local newspaper.*

In April and May, there was ample free time owing to the middle school and high school exams. Kasia was preparing for hers under the watchful eyes of her parents, and I spent the time alone, as my mother went away to Warsaw. There was time and space for me to be myself. I felt a burgeoning, blossoming feeling inside. It began to slowly dawn on me that I might be a lesbian—after all, I was attracted to a girl and felt something for her. By some stroke of luck, I chanced upon a beautiful film entitled *Kiss Me*. It tells the story of two women who suddenly discover that they're bound by something more than friendship.[10] It moved me and I thought it would make for a good suggestion, a bit of a test to tell me if we might reach the kind of ending that I saw in the film. She liked the film, too. Then she found another charming film, *Room In Rome*, also about lesbians. Subtle, with erotic overtones, but also moving, especially toward the end, when it all turns out to be a fleeting, one-time adventure.[11] I decided to take matters into my own hands and we went out for a pizza after school. I said I had something to tell her, but I couldn't bring myself

* "Młodzi naukowcy ze Szczecina zdobywają nagrody," Szczecin Nasze Miasto, 16 April 2013, https://szczecin.naszemiasto.pl/mlodzi-naukowcy-ze-szczecina-zdobywaja-nagrody/ar/c1-2772900 [author's note]

10 *Kyss mig* (*Kiss Me*, 2011, dir. Alexandra-Therese Keining) is a Swedish drama film whose protagonist, who had been living as a heterosexual, discovers she's attracted to another woman.

11 *Habitación en Roma* (*Room in Rome*, 2010, dir. Julio Medem) is a Spanish comedy-drama starring Elena Anaya, whose protagonists—two women from disparate backgrounds and with very little in common—meet seemingly by chance in Rome and spend a night together.

to do it either over pizza or after. I got back home and continued to build up my resolve. First, I did my homework, then there was other stuff to do, and eventually I took a bath. Once I left the bathroom, we both went on Facebook, so I collected myself and confessed my feelings for her. I told her about my love, but also about my fear—the fear that we might not be together for always, and that I needed to be sure that our love could last forever. My heart was beating like crazy; she replied that she loved me too, and that we would do whatever it took for it to last forever. I felt relieved; I felt immensely happy, joyful, warm. I don't know how I managed to fall asleep, maybe I was just tired. The next day at school flew by like nothing; I was walking on air, all smiles, euphoric, counting down the time for the class to end, for us to meet. The sense of being in love, the sense of love fulfilled, of love reciprocated, is astonishing, wonderful, incredible, difficult to put in words—you have to live it, and I wish it for everyone. I had neither the urge nor the inclination to tell my mother about it, and Kasia was even less inclined to mention it to her parents. But we didn't care. June is the final month of the school year, and the tasks for the next edition of the olympiad aren't out yet, so there's plenty of free time. We rode to the Głębokie Lake as often as we could. I told my mother I was picnicking and Kasia claimed she was biking, which wasn't actually a lie. On our first meeting after my confession I wanted intimacy, I wanted a first kiss, but there were people around, even in a clearing that was usually deserted. The very presence of the person I loved was incredible in itself, uplifting. The following weekend, we found an out-of-the-way bunker a little way beyond a nearby pond. The path got muddy afterwards, so we found our intimacy behind the bunker. And again, I had to make the first step in kissing, and since I was totally green, we clashed teeth. First kisses are generally funny—you clash teeth and bite one another, and yet there's still fireworks, joy, and love flowing within you. We improved with time. The bunker was our secret place, where we could hug, kiss, lay together, gently touch one another. Talk about us, about our shared future. We planned that Kasia would go to Warsaw to study and that I would join her a year later. After that, we would leave the country. But we spent the most time enjoying the moment, in the now. The rest was irrelevant.

My sexuality awakened. Never before had I felt like bringing myself this close to another person. We traded descriptions of our fantasies, which I composed in secret, while in the bathroom. I used my imagination to create scenarios of rapturous lovemaking, though I did also peruse one title my significant other had unearthed—*Lesbian Sex: 101 Lovemaking Positions* by Jude Schell. It was a funny little thing: many of the positions

only differed by the placement of the hand, making the author look rather unimaginative. Even I could come up with better stuff on my own. I once had a very pleasant erotic dream which had the love of my life in it; I woke up in the middle of the night and texted her a description. Then, I lay down blissfully, listening to the birdsong of the night. I didn't feel like sleeping even thought I was going to school the next day. Somehow, I did fall asleep, and felt completely recuperated in the morning—rested, happy, but also anxious: when would we get to be so close? Gentle caresses were only an option when we could hide in the basement or the attic of HS No. 2 or during our picnics behind the bunker.

Sadly, the desire for control proved irresistible and her parents forbade her from going to study in Warsaw—ostensibly for financial reasons, which sounded ridiculous in view of their status. I took the news very badly, even with a bit of hostility, partly egged on by my mother. She may not have known we were a couple, but she knew we were planning to go to the same university in Warsaw to pursue our scholarly careers. She spoke of lack of ambition, conformist tendencies, being a sell-out, and since I was upset myself, I passed it all on by text. Afterwards, I learned she had no choice—without the money, without any means to earn it, with no hope for financial support from the university (having well-heeled parents, she would never be given any, even if they didn't chip in a penny). Add to this the emotional blackmail and you get a proper cul-de-sac. Luckily, we quickly made up and our relationship survived intact.

Our achievements in the competition provided us with an incredible opportunity. We asked the approval of a professor at the Warsaw University of Technology for our participation in the next edition and turned to the Polish Children's Fund for money to cover our expenses and transport, and that was it! We got ourselves a full month together in Warsaw! Alone, without her parents phoning her every five minutes, without my mother trying to barge in on our meetings, far away from people who could rat us out to our parents. We counted the days until our departure, then hours, then minutes. We would only meet at the train station in Warsaw since I was leaving from Szczecin and she from her grandmother's in eastern Poland. Our accommodation in Warsaw was in a hotel for academic staff—we got a three-room suite with a bathroom and a kitchenette. We chose the room that had a sofa bed we could sleep on together. The room was technically designed for one, but everyone knows the furniture in places like these can be quite random. One of the other rooms was occupied by a girl I met once on some workshop, but she moved elsewhere after two days. I don't know why she got scared of us; there was nothing scary

about us. Rumour had it that she saw a cactus-shaped pen on a table in our room and thought it was a dildo. So who's got one-track minds—the LGBT+ folk or the cis-heteronormies? We just liked plants like cacti, so I couldn't resist buying it. We couldn't complain—the whole suite for us two! It's true that Warsaw became the place where we discovered ourselves, our bodies, our sexuality. They were entirely new experiences for me, and I felt immensely happy that I'd found the one person I wanted to be intimate with, be so close to. It gave me a lot of strength for living. We found names for our love acts, like snuggling or stroking, and for orgasm—flying. Our snuggles were subtle, delicate, natural, and our flights were intense, followed by bliss, melting away. For the first time I felt like talking about it, and it came easily, but only with my beloved. We shared our fantasies to make them happen. Sexuality to me is intimacy, it's something that's only for the people in the relationship. I feel uncomfortable when I'm expected to talk about it with someone other than the love of my life. It's not because of my upbringing or prudishness—that's just how I am. To be clear: we did complete the project, spending several hours in the lab day in and day out. After work, we went walking through the town, drank bubble tea, visited the zoo, Łazienki Park, went to the theatre for an adaptation of Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*. We made jewellery—two rainbow bracelets to wear as a token of our love. There was so much going on. We focussed on the here and now. Sadly, the end of the trip drew ever nearer, even though we extended our stay for a few days. Coming back was bleak: the school year was about to begin, and with it came constraints on the time we would spend together, and since she was enrolled at the university where her mother worked, it would be harder for us to slip away somewhere else without being seen.

After our return, I immediately went away for a class trip into the mountains, where I spent evenings alone with a book or texting with Kasia. I dropped out of the social loop completely, but I didn't care; my love gave me wings. Then, classes began again and all of a sudden, tragedy struck. It began with a text asking if I could hide her away for a bit. I was taken aback, given that she clearly knew how I lived and that we never had guests in the apartment. When I asked questions she didn't respond, and she was usually quick on the draw. Afterwards, I got a message on Facebook saying she was screwed—I couldn't reply because the account had been deleted. I didn't know what was going on and began to feel shaky, worried. I didn't even have anyone to cheer me up. I felt something bad must've happened. Between the lines of a patchwork of texts and short conversations during her walks with the dog, I managed to piece together that her parents had

broken into her Facebook account and read all her conversations—they called her a slut. They pulled up the erotic fantasies we had exchanged and read them in disgust, spiteful. They had her cut me off, forbade her from seeing me, talking to me, or having any kind of contact with me. Her stuff ended up in the garage, some of it even went out the window. The next three weeks felt like a blur, I can't recall the first thing about them. I told her I would never give up, that we would prevail, that everything would work out if she only stayed with me, kept faith in me. It worked. A new stage began.

Since the start of the school year, I'd been wearing the rainbow bracelet my love made for me every day, and Agata noticed. If I'd worn it from time to time, that would have been normal: I wore plenty of colourful stuff. But every day? Between classes, I told her the joyful, but now also mournful news. She was happy for me and commiserated about the parents while expressing disapproval of Kasia—after all, how could an adult allow herself to be ordered about like that? What I found surprising was the boundless support Agata was willing to give in spite of her religiosity, but as she herself put it, "my Father's house has many rooms," which also spoke to my own view of the issue. I'm a believer, but I believe in my own way, disregarding many of the theories and dogmas of the Church. I don't want to be a part of a community that rejects me and that pretends to be the sole exponent of true and just beliefs. Exclusion doesn't seem very Christian to me. I see Christianity as a religion of love, a religion of good, a religion that's positive. That's the content of "Love one another," of "Love thy neighbour as thyself." There was never any clash between my (then) orientation and my faith, religion. If God created me like that, he must love me like that, simple. For a time I talked about this with my beloved, who was of the conviction that being (at the time) a lesbian was wrong because the Church said so, because that's what the grand narrative (that we're force-fed) tells us. I disagreed—I think because I was religious in my own way; we didn't even have a cross in my home, but we did have Tarot cards, a pendulum, books on numerology, magic, and the like. My mum took me to church when I was in primary school, starting in the second year, because of the first communion; then she stopped. When we did go, we went to the Dominicans, who were quite open-minded and separate at the time. They had happy songs, a nun with a guitar; they had conversations and play-acted scenes between a father and his children. They had festivities. My parish, at Broniewskiego Street—and many others—criticised this approach and attitude, so much more human and less musty than their own. However, the argument that my whole class was going to

take first communion at the Dominicans proved unassailable and I was registered there. Afterwards, I skipped confirmation; I took to heart what the preacher had said: that you should only go if you felt ready, and not just to get it over with, that you needed to put in the time. I didn't feel the need, and furthermore, I had no time for all those masses and meetings, even if less frequent than in other parishes—I had plenty of learning to take care of. My grandma would only go with the Easter basket, but Grandpa was my most frequent companion. Grandma said the nightly prayers; she taught me "Our Father," "Hail Mary," and "Angel of God," and that's as far as manifestations of religiosity went. For the longest time, I thought you always needed to use these formulas, but then I began to compose my own prayers, which I still do. Faith is a personal thing for me.

After those three weeks, we met at the public library by Żołnierza Polskiego Square. The library itself is on the first floor and there's an empty hallway outside. We sat there and let the tears flow, hugging as long as we could. We decided to devise code messages to use when we could talk, so that I knew it was her. In the past, her parents—particularly her father—had unfortunately gone so far as to take her phone away, even just after 6pm, and read her texts (with time, she learned to delete everything once she got home) or wrote to her friends. I could make out the author since everybody has their own style of writing. We also devised codes for calling, for making it clear she was out walking and could talk. We changed the codes quite often, basically every day. Outside of that, to make it possible to talk even when we couldn't (e.g. when she was at home), we wrote in little notebooks—I had plenty from childhood and my early teens because they were often added to all sorts of things: magazines, yoghurt, competition prizes, etc. I wrote and so did she. Whenever we met—now much more rarely than before—we exchanged the notes. Kasia burned the pages after reading in the meadow while we were out walking. She carried the notebooks in the false bottom of her military backpack, impossible to find unless you knew where to look. With time, our code list expanded with codes for chatting. We used the chats on the Wirtualna Polska and Interia websites, as well as other web portals, always writing under pre-determined nicks. This had the added virtue that it left no trace, and one can never guess what tools a power-mad parent might use. It was hard for me, but my hope for a better future increased. You might ask: but why go through all this trouble? Well, as much as my mother was preoccupied with her Warsaw lover, Kasia's father worked from home and her mother was in the same university department where Kasia had been made to study—she even became the counsellor for her daughter's year...

She was the first to learn about Kasia's grades, and would know immediately about her absences. So Kasia couldn't miss a single class. Apparently, work at the university is no work at all: Kasia's mother drove her to class every day and took her back home right afterwards. The father, for his part, had already proven himself capable of locking the house so that no one could leave. Add to this gossiping neighbours who spend their days between the Galeria Kaskada and Galaxy shopping centres (as it happens, both are right in the middle of the city, near my school) and who can't wait to tell the parents that they saw their children with this or that person, at this or that time, and doing this or that. I'm not making it up—such people do exist.

We also had to set the record straight somehow on our competition entry. As it happened, in his fervour Kasia's father had written to the professor who advised us from Kasia's address, claiming that she was ceding the entirety of the work to me and that I would have to complete it myself. The professor didn't quite understand what was going on, so he reached out to me. Without getting into the details, I told him her parents didn't like me and were fairly overbearing, but that we would pull through. Kasia somehow managed to convince them that we would continue the work together, but apart. And so, the work was completed, submitted to two competitions, and accepted in both. Cunning though those people were in finding ways to exercise control, they couldn't quite "connect the dots," read between the lines. Thankfully.

We were now seeing each other only once a week—the day Kasia had her PE class. In the first semester she took horse-riding classes, and the horse farm was located a bit beyond my house, so she picked me up at school and we went there together. We had two or three hours before the class began. So much time, so little time, to hug, to talk, to taste one another's lips, to exchange notebooks. In the second semester it was Nordic walking, and the class was on weekends. I came by, as did many other plus-ones from outside the university. Afterwards, we found a refuge at Aunt Ewa's (Kasia's aunt), who lived nearby and gladly had us over for dinner. As far as her parents knew, Kasia went alone; the aunt was let in on things as autumn turned into winter. This was also the year Conchita Wurst performed at the Eurovision song contest. Oh, how much noise people made, both in real life and in the virtual world! Being sensitive to art, I couldn't understand at all why people would feel so offended by an artistic performance—setting aside questions of orientation and gender identity, this nation is bereft of any understanding of art forms. I enjoyed the vocal performance and the song, and the character seemed intriguing to me. Once at Aunt Ewa's, we ran

the competition performance on repeat all afternoon. Having learned my lesson that it's better to stay quiet, I kept my mouth shut when my mother expressed her distaste, more or less along the lines of: "Is it a bloke, or is it a dame? How provocative, he calls himself Shelly Sausage. What's all this about?! He's winning because he's a weirdo."

We received a prize from the Minister of Education. The ceremony took place in an office building; invitations were extended to pupils, but parents or teachers could also attend. I was already of age, so none of the teachers bothered to sit through a boring speech and brief diploma presentation just for me. We planned to spend some time together after the ceremony, but sadly, the father of my beloved decided at the last minute to join her at the event. I promptly received the news that the meeting was off. It brought me down, but I knew it was no use forcing the issue. How painful and difficult it was, to sit in one cramped room, so close to one another, and only be able to exchange a dry "Hi." The father completely ignored me. The best thing about the prize was the amount, and the fact that it was transferred directly into the personal account of the recipient. My beloved could stash it in her own account; the three thousand she got offered a real prospect of making it out of Szczecin. Start-up money, it eventually allowed her to buy a ticket out and survive a full month.

In the second semester, we also had the out-of-town competitions. The first took us to Poznań in February. We found a place to stay overnight because it was actually impossible to make it on the opening day—Kasia's parents somehow bought it that we were sleeping in separate rooms and would only be in contact during our presentation. So much time together, bodies hungry for touch, souls pining for love and intimacy. On the train, we watched *Blue Is the Warmest Colour*—to me, a phenomenal, beautiful, and sensitive film. It showed the beauty of love between two girls, and it also showed that there was nothing wrong about it, that there is a world where people aren't bothered or shocked by it, where they accept it.[12] The competition receded somewhere into the background—but that's not to say we didn't work! We made it to the final, which meant four more days together. A few weeks later, we went to Warsaw on a three-day trip for the other competition. This time, my chemistry teacher joined us as a chaperone—I guess the hosts were tired of having the parents over and requested that only teachers be admitted as guardians. I remember our

12 *La Vie d'Adèle—chapitre 1 & 2* (*Blue Is the Warmest Colour*, 2013, dir. Abdellatif Kechiche) is a French drama film adapted from a comic book by Jul Maroh (*Le bleu est une couleur chaude*, Grenoble 2010) starring Adèle Exarchopoulos and Léa Seydoux.

advisor, the professor, talk in glowing terms about our cooperation, to which the chemistry teacher added: "I believe they are bound together by something more than just the projects." The professor must have let that one slip or didn't catch it, I don't know. The chemistry teacher was a pretty perceptive observer of the world around her, few things escaped her. I suspect she caught on at one point that we were together, but she never said anything about it, made no allusions, her attitude didn't change one bit. I really liked and respected you, Ms. Basia! Our last outing led us to the final of the first competition, hosted in Gdynia. Right before, we had a little misunderstanding: we were supposed to take the same train—it's always 4 more hours together—but her parents told her she had to go to some pointless class at the university and take the next train instead. I felt a bit rejected, offended, I put on a sulk. When I reached the hotel, I closed the door to our room and pretended I wasn't getting her texts that she was on her way. I wasn't going to pick her up from the train station. In the end, she found her way to the hotel by herself. I sat with a book as if nothing had happened, barely holding back the tears. Then we both cried our hearts out, and leapt into one another's arms. After that came forgiveness, and the disagreement was gone. We ordered pizza to the room and spent the rest of the evening inside. The room we got had a bed for newly-weds—as we learned upon our departure, we were the only ones to get one, as other participants were assigned 2-person rooms with separate single beds. It couldn't have been for lack of options—it was a giant Orbis hotel in Gdynia, right by the Music Theatre. Even though we hadn't outed ourselves, some of the folks (most? all?) already knew we were a couple. Oh, those rumours...! I didn't care that they knew. I saw no reason to out myself to people I only knew from having met them once at a competition. The competition itself was made up of a poster session that lasted a few hours and some never-ending, boring workshops we played truant from to go sightseeing in Gdynia with Kris, a new friend we'd made on the Internet. He guided us through the centre of the city and along the seafront, but the visibility was low because of the fog. On the last day of our stay, the sun came out and we had our day on the beach—we have smiley, beautiful pictures from that morning. After that came the return and the tears, for that was the last competition of the season and a few months would pass before our next scheduled trip. After the tears, though, came action, and we set about planning that final trip.

We began looking for a room to let and, well, the prices were pretty staggering. Oftentimes, an acceptable price could only get you a hovel practically outside of Warsaw. I looked into it every moment I had when

I was alone at home and had free access to the computer. I wrote the phone numbers on a piece of paper, along with the price and some code to be able to retrieve the offer, if needed. We planned to go in July, right after Kasia's exam session, so that she could transfer and continue her studies in Warsaw starting in the second year. Her parents toned down their control and we could meet on the Chrobry Embankment, at a copy shop, or at my school. Though we tried not to show it too much at school, I think the teachers and some of the pupils realised what the connection between us was. I was a bit of a household name in my school because of the competitions, but no one approached me or made any comments about us. I didn't care if they knew, if they gossiped about it. If they're this bored by their own lives, so be it! In the end, I found a room, we paid our deposit by bank transfer (foolishly, don't ever do this!) and felt relieved as well as surprised—that it was this quick and this easy, that it was already done.

I've always had problems with my period, but toward the end of the final year of high school, it just went haywire. My mother scheduled an appointment for me at a gynaecologist. Even though I was 19, I still felt like a little child in this relationship, still thought I needed her permission, that she had to schedule my visit and take me there. Hiding my relationship from her already felt like a major rebellion. I went to the doctor with her and walked into the room alone. I stepped in it right away. I had to tell the doctor I was sleeping with a girl. To my surprise, he just took it in, did the ultrasound and found nothing. He prescribed some pills and I left. I told my mum about the results and wanted to hide them in my bag, but she took them, looked at the ultrasound, then back at me, and said: "Have you had sex with anyone?"* I was a bit astonished and said, yeah, with Kasia. Of course, she began to ask when and how, how it was possible at all—I evaded most questions and felt like disappearing, running away, hiding. My mother was disappointed that I hadn't told her about my relationship or my sex life. To this day, I fail to understand how my sex life is anybody else's business. Caught in the crossfire, I told her about our July trip and this drew another bout of disappointment and anger from her—what did I mean, I was off in two months?! I thought she was expecting it, since I was about to move there for my studies in October and had set up a traineeship in August at the Institute for Physical Chemistry at the Polish Academy of Sciences. I'd been told my whole life how I'd wrecked hers, how she couldn't go anywhere because of me, so I assumed she'd

* Ultrasounds are done differently on virgins than on non-virgins [author's note].

expected me to leave her alone and would approve. Sadly, that wasn't the case—she expected to go with me and rent a place for us two, of course paid for by my alimony and scholarship.

Another slip-up involved Kasia's parents. About a month before the scheduled departure, I gave her my old phone. We planned to go separately, since I had to be in Warsaw around mid-June for preparations for the International Chemistry Olympiad, and she had her exam session at the university at the time. The phone lay hidden among the two bags under her bed. So there I was, sitting at home and packing for my departure, when I suddenly hear my phone ring. I pick up; silence. I send a text—nothing. I ring back—nothing. I ring the other, official number—she picks up. I ask her why she called me from the other number. Silence. Panic. It turned out she was outside the house and her mum was in, rummaging through her room as she did probably every day. Luckily her father was out because he had gone on a work trip to England, so other than some emotional blackmail she was basically in the clear. She packed her stuff quickly and left for her grandma's in Stargard, where she would be safe and from where she could go straight to her exams. I had to leave for Warsaw.

Warsaw

In Warsaw, me and some three boys were installed in an Ibis Budget hotel; as a girl, I got a separate room. I took only one suitcase because I was supposed to return to Szczecin for a few days after the preparations—my mother insisted I spend some time with her. I went to classes and kept in constant touch with my beloved. Her mother came to Stargard for her and took her back home, wanted to send her to some Catholic psychologist. In her eyes, a girl in love with another girl was inconceivable, must have been demonic possession or whatever. Things were getting more and more frantic. In circumstances like these, any thought of studying for the exams and passing them went out the window, so Kasia decided to enrol at the Warsaw University of Technology as a first-year student and try to get as many transfer credits as she could. On Wednesday, her sister had some award ceremony that she went to with the mother, so Kasia packed her suitcase, two backpacks, and a laptop bag, and went to the train station. The train from Szczecin to Warsaw had a three-hour delay before departure and time was essential, so she jumped into the first train to Poznań—anything to leave Szczecin before mother came home. In class, I couldn't use the phone, so I just crossed my fingers and peeked at the screen whenever I had the chance. Once she left Szczecin,

I was relieved: she'd be here eventually. In Poznań, she caught a train to Warsaw without a hitch and I picked her up at Warszawa Zachodnia station around 10 or 11pm. At the station, I clung to her and couldn't let go, I just needed to hold her so much. We went to the hotel I was staying in. It's often used for all kinds of workshops, trips, and other events, and there have been many cases where people got in on the sly—apparently, the staff don't care. Oh, what joy and relief to finally be together! No one will tear us apart anymore! As soon as we were back in the hotel, I dyed my beloved's hair blue, the same shade worn by the heroine of *Blue Is the Warmest Colour*. In the mornings, I went down for breakfast and made her a sandwich to go, and then we all left the hotel and only got back together after the classes, somewhere around 6–7pm. But in Warsaw, we were safe.

After a few days at the hotel, we got around to collecting the keys to the apartment in Witolin. The area was very nice, well-connected, a room with a view on the outskirts of the city. We were supposed to share the apartment with two students, but they turned out to be two middle-aged labourers. They came in on Monday for the night and did so throughout the week, leaving on Friday morning. Obviously, for them we posed as a pair of friends going to university together—nothing out of the ordinary. In the day, I left for the preparations, and Kasia was at work at Greenpeace; when we got back, we ate supper and went to sleep. Kasia outed herself at Greenpeace, but they reacted normally, happy that she was happy. I met those people—very appealing, I sometimes came over to them during breaks. They inspired us to become vegetarians, and then soon after, vegans.

I had to go back to Szczecin for my stuff. In fact, that's all I went back for since mother—who had insisted so much on us spending time together—was now angry with me and went out somewhere for whole days; it felt as if I didn't matter to her, like I got in her way. I packed my clothes and books into a few boxes and shipped them at a decent price thanks to Mr. Maciek, and then hopped back to Warsaw with one suitcase and a few bags.

After my return, we decided to fulfil my dream of adopting a rabbit. We went to the Fundacja Królewska.[13] While talking to Ola, who looked after the rabbits, we didn't mention that we were a couple, but I should think that when two people come together to adopt a rabbit they're unlikely to be

13 Fundacja Królewska (lit. Royal Foundation)—a volunteer-led rabbit refuge and adoption service in Warsaw. Its name plays on the similarity between the words król (king) and królik (rabbit).

mere roommates. At the time, many of the rabbits had already been given away to their new homes, but the owner of the Foundation was grooming one as we spoke, then still known as Fernandez. It looked very much like my Speedy and I fell in love. After inquiring about our living conditions and time constraints, she decided that the rabbit would be a perfect fit for us. The fact that I wanted to pick it up after my return from Vietnam wasn't an issue since it still needed to be castrated and vaccinated. We were over the moon and set about collecting the necessities. We managed to find a cage at a favourable price, so we went over for it; we bought bowls, hay, litter, and the recommended feed. Everything ready for our new family member. We decided to rechristen it and chose the name Pinen: it's this compound that looks like a rabbit and smells of pine trees. Other than that, I sat in our room day in, day out, cramming before my departure and trying not to interact with our flatmates, who scared me. After a few days, I took a 10-day trip to Vietnam, visited Hanoi and the surrounding area, brought back a bronze medal and looked forward to the traineeship, coming up a few days down the line.

Then the flatmates began to stir up trouble. They threw away our milk, spilled our breadcrumbs. We tried to reason with them, but to no avail. Initially they agreed for us to have the rabbit, but a few days later they made noises again because I had spilt water in my room, and they took it for piss. They started talking about us having to pay a deposit, about additional fees for us. They didn't accept that we had already paid the deposit to the man who'd given us the keys. It turned out he was not the owner of the apartment but their mate, and the owner was unknown. A neighbour told us some old folks used to live there, but then they died and a young man from Wałcz claimed ownership of the apartment, but he'd been absent for a number of years and the place was used by these same two men and whoever happened to be there—students for a few months, then some other labourers. At one point, the men marched into our room and told us: "We're normal, simple folk, and we won't tolerate this stuff!" and then left. We hadn't outed ourselves to them and only smooched when they weren't in, so they couldn't have seen that we were a couple. Unless they peeped on us during the night, who knows. Because we did sleep in the same bed, even though there were two for our use. I was a bit apprehensive about those two men, so we decided to look for a different place—we were already in the city, so it went much more smoothly. We rang the numbers in the ads about single rooms that could accommodate a pair—people hung up at the first mention of "two girls," even before we could say we were in a relationship (after all, we could just as well be two sisters or cousins, eh?).

We managed to find a room in a house at Kanarkowa Street, right by the Kabacki Forest. It may have been less well-connected, but at least it was peaceful and spacious—the room had more than twenty square metres! There was also no problem with us bringing in a rabbit; Ms. Jola had three dogs of her own. One weekend, while our flatmates were out, we called in a few of our friends and brought our things over across the city using public transport. It took us the whole day, but it was worth it. We left *Replika* and a bunch of flyers for Lambda and Campaign Against Homophobia (KPH) as a parting gift.[14]

Our new landlady lived on the ground floor, her daughter with her husband and teenage children lived on the first floor, and the second floor and attic were rented out. She didn't butt into the lives of her tenants, and neither did the others. Each floor had its own bathroom and the kitchen for the tenants was in the basement, so we didn't get in each other's way at all. She even offered us a one-year lease! Our room had plenty of cupboards and two beds. We slept on one, and then made a minor reshuffle and moved the two together. The other tenants were mostly just in for the night and got back to their actual homes on weekends, so you didn't feel those numbers. N., the teenage daughter of the owner, was one year my junior and sometimes peeked into our kitchen while we were cooking for a bit of chit-chat. Once, she barged into our room and asked us straight if we were a couple, then went on to out herself as a lesbian and shared some stories about the LGBT+ community in Warsaw. I did my best to try to come to terms with the fact that I had a girlfriend, so I took stabs at leaving my comfort zone and saying it aloud: yes, I have a girlfriend, yes, we're together. My beloved couldn't quite get there yet, the result of exposure to a peculiar social and religious outlook. N.'s openness took me aback—but at the same time, I was also surprised that it was so evident that we were an item, and to such a degree that it took only a few meetings to notice, even though we showed affection, even just embraced, only behind closed doors.

From dawn to dusk I was holed up at the Institute, where I kept my private life to myself—I saw no need to share and I was apprehensive about the prospect of rejection. A cis-hetero couple can say they went to cinema or for a walk, but I had to hide behind the cloak of friendship. After two months, they said, "Thanks, bye," and there went my prospect of employment and an academic career. It hurt a bit, but the academic year was only just beginning, so I thought, maybe I'll get something going

14 *Replika*—see n. 14 on p. 61; Campaign Against Homophobia—see n. 26 on p. 82; Lambda—see n. n. 4 on p. 91.

at the university? I had soaked up my mother's ambitions and felt compelled to make an academic career in chemistry, even though I didn't enjoy lab work. Labs always stink, your hands are always wet, and the work takes hours every day. Shutting off my mother's influence was difficult since she decided out of the blue to move to Warsaw. She arrived with a truckload of stuff and settled at the other end of the city. She asked me on several occasions: "Are you sure you're a lesbian? Maybe you're bi? Have you ever tried it with a boy? But how *do* you do it?" I waved away most of those questions or changed the subject. Why is no one asking that of people in cis-hetero relationships, I wonder. Besides, my mother was angry with me because "instead of focussing on science, you're nesting. She's dragging you down! And that rabbit of yours, why the commitment?" To her, "nesting" meant decorating our room with key rings collected during trips—or, at least, that's where the argument started. I began to notice that her supposed tolerance was a meaningless word; along the way, I also became aware of other flaws in our relationship, which led to a gradual severing of the umbilical cord. I just wanted a life of my own, without the constant negativity. Without someone trying to control me, tell me what to do and what not to do. To me, family is people I feel good with, who love me and accept me for who I am, with whom I share some connection. Blood ties don't make a family: I value shared DNA less than I do connection, common interests, support, unconditional love, or friendship. Some of my friends are closer to me than the aunt I only see once every year for a birthday or holiday.

At the university, we switched groups to be together and share the same classes. It took me just a few days to start thinking studying wasn't for me and that I wouldn't like it, but I decided to give it a fair shot. The classes were terrible, but we met a few good people. Stasiu was one of them. Already during our first shared class, a mere week into the semester, he came over and asked us if we were a couple. We nodded, surprised that it showed, to which Stasiu introduced himself and told us he was gay, so he had this "gay radar." We got off to a good start, so a few days later we invited him over for a pizza. It turned out Stasiu remembered me from competitions and that we had a shared friend, incidentally also a gay man. He was very talkative, joyful, had plenty of positive energy and an unusual aura. We met often, at our place or at his. But many people at the university were conservative knuckleheads, as you'd expect from a polytechnic. That was where I first met people who were actually proud of having been photographed in front of the burning rainbow at Zbawiciela Square, who were capable of making openly hateful comments like "Leftism rotted your

brains" in conversation about a student meeting.[15] Come to think of it, other than Stasiu I made no friends at the university.

Stasiu was actively involved in the student group of Lambda, as was Kasia. As for me, I only went there a couple of times. As a social-phobic introvert, I felt an irresistible urge to keep myself to myself. But even those few encounters allowed me to meet a large number of people—mostly gays, but also, as would later turn out, trans folk. From time to time, we made a bonfire on the banks of the Vistula or went to a bar or joint. To my surprise, this was the first time when my refusal to drink alcohol didn't raise any eyebrows or prompt attempts to push me into drinking. And cis-hetero folk would always do that, how so? I just don't like alcohol; I never smoked and I don't intend to, it doesn't seem appealing to me; and I won't even mention other substances. Participants in the meetings usually spent the "post-Lambding"—the meeting after the meeting—by going out for a beer, but it really served as a backdrop, not a goal in itself. Kasia tried to break through my social phobias and draw me out for the meetings. I usually listened in, but I would occasionally add something or other. However, a discussion group was a bit much for my anxieties.

Once, they had knot-tying workshops at the Lambda. Ever open to new experiences and experiments, Kasia went and returned with a piece of rope and some knowledge. We tried it a few times, but it didn't appeal to me—I kept faith with my established preferences of using that which nature gave me. At the time, I was convinced you had to engage in stroking every day, and that the absence of daily stroking meant a troubled relationship or love dissipating—the result of constant inculcation of the myth that "sex is proof of love." After a while, stroking became a kind of going-to-bed ritual, something you just had to do before you fell asleep. When we were too tired to do it, I woke up the next day worried that something was off. A lot of time was yet to pass before this changed for me.

This was also the period when I first went clubbing, and not just anywhere—to Warsaw's Glam dance club.[16] It was hosting a concert by Anja

15 The Rainbow at Zbawiciela Square was an installation by Julita Wójcik, originally placed in front of the European Parliament in Brussels (2011—12), and then moved to Warsaw (2012—15). Before its eventual removal, the Rainbow was repeatedly burned at the instigation and with the involvement of right-wing activists and politicians. For more, see: Karol Sienkiewicz, "Noah, Gays and the Rainbow: A sculpture reveals the hypocrisy surrounding LGBT rights," *Switch On Paper*, 20 August 2020, https://www.switchonpaper.com/en/society/minorities/noah-gays-and-the-rainbow-a-sculpture-reveals-the-hypocrisy-surrounding-lgbt-rights/.

16 Glam is a major nightclub in Warsaw catering to an LGBT+ clientele.

Orthodox,[17] and I really wanted to go. And it was so affordable—a mere 10 zlotys! Of course, the concert began late, and, this being a completely new experience for me, I sat there at a table with Kasia and Szamot, another friend from Lambda. At one point, Stasiu and Tomek (also from Lambda) dragged me onto the dance floor and we had great fun. I really liked the look of the walls, covered in long-haired rugs, and the pink lighting. A real pink world. The concert itself was good; it lasted more than an hour, and then me and Kasia left. Clubbing isn't what we do. It was too noisy, too crowded.

The parents of my beloved didn't let go. They kept writing to her on Gadu-Gadu, sending dozens of texts, and when she blocked their numbers, they bought new SIM cards and continued to inundate her with stories of sin, disgust, children disrespecting their parents, lives of cult members, asking questions like "Who's mummy and who's daddy in your sick little family?" and lots of other bullshit. Her father once sent a text threatening to "slaughter me like a pig." I was afraid and wanted to report it to the police, but the officer decided that, since he's a family member, we should deal with it between ourselves, and told me he could register my complaint but I should know that no one was going to do anything about it. I wasn't surprised by police indolence—years ago, they also couldn't do anything about my so-called father and a bunch of security guards threatening me and my mother. Sadly, Warsaw was along the way to a number of other destinations, so they took to invading our privacy. Once, we left class to find her father seated in front of the door; he told her like a dictator: "You're joining me for dinner." We could argue all we wanted—he insisted and acted as if I wasn't there. Luckily there are a few secret hideouts and passages in that building, so we just broke loose and ran. From our hiding place, we could hear him screaming at a cloakroom lady, asking whether she saw us. The woman couldn't understand what he was after, so she told him she hadn't seen anyone and that he had better go away. He did, in the end; we waited a bit and walked out through a side door, taking a roundabout route to the bus stop for safety. On another occasion, November 11th, her mother began to ring the intercom like crazy around 7am. Afraid she would wake up the whole house, my beloved went downstairs to open the door, and she pushed inside, barged into the kitchen, called her husband, and began weeping theatrically about the squalor their baby was living in. Then, she took offence that no one was offering her tea, and when she got

17 Anja Orthodox (b, 1964), Polish singer and composer, frontwoman of the goth rock band Closterkeller and a local icon of the genre.

one—that the tea bag was still in. We went into our room and she started rattling off like a lunatic. I ran away crying, tripped on a dryer, and escaped a few dozen yards further, to the edge of the forest. It was cold and wet. I was wishing for her go away, for Kasia to come for me, and for this whole nightmare to end. I sat there for some two hours and then came back. There was no one in the room; my kitty left a note saying she would be back soon because her mother's train left after 1pm. She did return, and I was lucky enough to not catch a cold. That nightmare ended. Where she got the address, we didn't know. It was only later that we found out her parents had hired a detective. Another time, they stood under the windows of our house (just as a reminder, its owner, her family, and a number of tenants also lived there) and began to shout loud enough for the whole block to hear that they had come and that Kasia must come out. Inside our room, we acted like we weren't there; I think someone finally told them to naff off and we could breathe a sigh of relief. Then, they tried to recruit her cousin who lived outside Łuków.[18] That was a bit of a laugh. We were away at Dolar's place near Warsaw for the weekend. So there we are in this village by the Kampinos Forest when my beloved gets a text from her cousin: "Open the door!!" Kasia replies that she's not home, that she's away with a friend. "Go on, open!!" Eventually, the cousin got through the gate and marched into the house like she owned the place—and bumped into Ms. Jola, surprised by the intrusion. She was told to leave the premises and to cease trespassing. That did the trick.

There came the day when my beloved shared with me some fairly shocking news—namely, that she felt she was a boy. She told me Szamot, a pretty keen observer of the world, had said much the same in a conversation with her, that she seemed like a boy trapped in a girl's body. With other people around, we exchanged these bits of intel via the Internet. We agreed to return to the conversation, but somehow we never did. After a while, as I was putting clean clothes in the closet, I found bandages inside; then, I found some in her backpack when looking for something else (with her permission, of course). She had told me before that she didn't like her near-flat, non-existent breasts, but why tie them with bandages? I told her to stop doing it because it's unhealthy. It wasn't about aesthetics, not at all. I thought (and rightly so) that binding one's breasts can lead to breathing problems, deformed ribs. Now, once I got to searching for some information, I found some weird website that portrayed trans identity as

18 Łuków—a minor town 70 miles east of Warsaw, a considerable distance away from two major highways headed to the capital (Siedlce-Warsaw and Lublin-Warsaw).

a psychological disorder. It scared me a bit, though it would turn out much later that the website was unreliable; and yet, it was among the top hits on Google... Then again, I kept thinking it might all be a phase. She did tell me once that she's a bit of a weirdo, a twofer, but I didn't understand that 100% and thought she meant she was a tomboy. I didn't know any trans person at the time—I only knew about Anna Grodzka, who was the butt of the joke, her old personal data being brought up constantly. I remember she appeared once on the Tomasz Lis show and the conversation somehow drifted toward trans identity.[19] I was in high school at the time and politics didn't interest me at all, so the only thing I can recall is comments my mother made, which spoke to the belief that sex is encoded exclusively in chromosomes. Transgender characters also appeared occasionally in films, whether in the aforementioned works by Almodóvar or *Transamerica*, which we bumped into entirely by chance among the free titles on Kinoplex or some other service of the type. The latter has trans identity a bit in the backdrop, in a comedic light—not in a negative sense, just not as an issue. It's much easier to brand trans folk as weirdos, cross-dressers, psychos. A saddening and stigmatising approach. Outside of that, I had visited the Przychodnia squat a few times and saw some queers while there, but it seemed to me that such people exist somewhere far off, beyond reach, that there are very few of them. On the one hand, they made for fascinating figures; on the other, I felt a bit uncomfortable around them. Was it because of the atmosphere of the squats, so different from the world I know, or was it because I was being shown that you could cut across all known norms, divisions, and stereotypes, that a single individual could muster the courage to do that and decide to free themselves, and yet the world didn't explode? The hopelessness you know always seems better than unknown freedom at first, simply because it is known.

Somewhere around that time, my beloved person began to call themselves "Iryd," after the chemical particle Iridium, which creates colourful compounds. The pseudonym was used mostly by our friends—I continued to use "my love," "teddy bear," or "kitty," almost never the given name. Then, there was the African wild dog drawn by Dolar, a friend of theirs. Why a wild dog? Well, it came from our high school codes. Because of my love of rabbits, I would sometimes write "hop skip," and she replied

19 Anna Grodzka (b. 1954), social activist and politician, member of the parliament in 2011–2015. Co-founder and first president of the Trans-Fuzja Foundation. Tomasz Lis (b. 1966), famous Polish liberal political journalist and TV personality, hosted his own prime-time politics-and-society show, *Tomasz Lis na żywo* (Tomasz Lis Live), on public TV in 2008–2016.

with "tap tap." Then we began to wonder what kind of animal goes "tap tap," and it turned out it was the African wild dog. My beloved wanted to cut their hair, which means a lot when it reaches your waist. We cut it to about shoulder length. In fact, after our experiments with hair dyes, colourising mousses, and bleaching, it actually did the hair a lot of good. Once, they went to the kitchen and left their laptop with Facebook open. I couldn't resist the temptation to have a peek at their conversation with Dolar. I read it, and couldn't believe it. My beloved wrote that they were trans and couldn't go on like this, and that they would finally start doing something about it, and I would have to accept it or that was it—which the interlocutor gave his endorsement for. I was terrified. The love I'd fought so hard for seemed to be hanging by a thread. A matter so intimate was discussed with an acquaintance, and not with me. I came down to the kitchen shaken, rattled, and in tears, and asked them if they were planning to do something to themselves and leave me. We hugged, I calmed down, and the matter was set aside, as were all related actions. My love promised to write it all in a notebook so that I could read it because they couldn't make sense of it when talking. Once, I chanced upon a little red notebook while searching for something else in our home, and I glimpsed a few confessions: about how they had always felt like a boy, how they would like to be called Piotrek, for Peter Pan, whom they'd adored in childhood, how they still loved me the same and nothing would change that. These few pages set my heart aflutter, but I quickly hid them back where I found them to avoid being caught. Even though those sentences kept running through my head, I kept it all to myself.*

In the meantime, I decided to dye my hair pink halfway up, painted my nails for the first time since childhood, and soaked up the joy of it—until I met my mother a few days later. She looked at me with disgust and said "What have you done to yourself? Look at yourself!" Tears came up instantly and I cried all the way home. Once back, I cut off all the dyed hair (so, to about shoulder length) and removed the polish, still crying. I kept thinking she was my mother and I should stay in touch with her, but on the other hand, I increasingly felt that it was hurtful and toxic for me.

* I'm well aware that it's customary to use a transgender person's preferred pronouns throughout their life-stories, rather than just the period after self-recognition or outing. Here, I've been using feminine forms mixed in with neuters—not out of transphobia, but due to the formal expectations of the genre: diary, chronological account. I asked Iryd what he felt I should do and he agreed that I should stick to the reality of the moment: describing him as a girl because that's how he manifested back then, and switching to masculine forms after the outing. As the interested party in this case, he's not hiding that he's trans and has no problem with being described in this way [author's note].

The end of the academic year was fast approaching, my will to continue studying dropped to zero, the costs of living in Warsaw increased more and more, and we'd had enough of twenty-minute walks to the nearest stop and hour-long trips to the university. We wanted to finally have our own living space, something bigger than a single room. Then, there was also the occasional invasion of our privacy by the parents, my mother's looming presence, and my conviction that the notion of being a boy in a girl's body was being actively stirred awake by acquaintances. I felt like leaving Warsaw for good. I couldn't come up with any other course of studies, so I decided to stay in chemistry and find a university that would accept me as a transfer student. I thought that, since the Jagiellonian University had extended an invitation to me after I finished high school (as they did every other olympian), that might be a solution. We agreed to leave for Kraków. I also decided to call upon Daniel, with whom I had lost contact after high school. I wanted to out myself to him, but he already knew. How? Probably from gossip—after all, Szczecin is just a village with a few tram lines, everybody knows everybody or someone who knows them. He took it pretty well, which wasn't surprising: he often spoke out in defence of homosexual people, including in some Internet discussions, and believed anyone can love and be with whoever they want.

We managed to find an apartment in Stare Podgórze. My beloved went there in late June to sign the contract and we had a month left to settle our affairs in Warsaw, with the move scheduled for August. I went to the Centre of New Technologies (CeNT), where we both enlisted as trainees sometime in February. Kasia only went there a few times before they told her they had no time for her. Soon enough, I got the same treatment. When I went there to tell them that we were moving out and that I would no longer be coming, they were happy to hear it because they'd planned to give me notice anyway—as if there was any need for that: the work I did there was voluntary. Was it all down to homophobia, even though we kept a low profile? I can't say—maybe so; it's not unlikely that they heard the rumours. After all, quite a few people from the Polytechnic were working for them—some of them even got paid for it. I once met a guy there from one of the competitions who was lucky enough to get beyond dishwashing. Sadly, the academic community of Polish chemists is properly antediluvian in its opinions and outlook on the world.

Just before our departure, we decided to throw an early birthday party for my beloved to celebrate with those closest to us. I was saddened by the fact that only a handful of the large group of invitees turned up—it felt like most talked their way out of the event with made-up excuses. In spite

of the low turnout, we had great fun. We were joined by Franka—another person we'd met through Lambda. We hit it off right away; she stayed overnight and talked to us about her own studies—information science. That's not coincidental, but more about it later. Franka helped us move, or rather, her mum did: it was her that took us, Pinen, and our stuff to the railway station and helped us get on the train. We travelled with two suitcases, a rabbit, and a few small bags; the rest was stuffed into cardboard boxes and shipped by delivery service. Actually, it's a very cheap and impressive way to move when there's no furniture to drag you down. You can throw in all the clothes and books, even the rabbit cage. I couldn't leave a family member behind! Pinen stayed calm on the train while I soaked in the landscapes of southern Poland.

Kraków

For the first time, I had an apartment of my own, and I was over the moon. It had a separate bathroom, hallway, and living room, with a kitchen attached to it, but as if stowed away in its own corner. IKEA quality furniture, so presentable, but not imperishable. Iryd immediately joined Greenpeace—the move from the Warsaw office to the one in Kraków presented no problems. At weekends and after work we toured our new home town, wandering through the many streets of its Old Town district. After a few days we were visited by Franka, who happened to be staying with her brother. Then Stasiu dropped by for one night on his way back from holidays. I explored anew my artistic skills, having revived them a few months back. Iryd decided to drop out and train to be a veterinary technician and I was admitted as a second-year student at the Jagiellonian University without a hitch. On the first day, Ania—Stasiu's high school friend—contacted me. We quickly found common ground. She was roughly my height and size and we both wore glasses and had blond hair dyed pink halfway up—pure coincidence, but that's how we looked the first time we saw each other. Things seemed to be going fine, but the thin layer of calm hid something boiling and menacing. Time and again, our conversations with Iryd touched upon his feeling out of place, struggling to keep going down the same path—that is, as a girl. To my regret, I continued to play down the problem, mostly out of fear of change, out of fear about the future, out of fear of abandonment. The topic virtually never came up when we spoke face to face, but mostly in texts. I thought if he started wearing men's clothes and got the Mohican he'd dreamed of—which I botched, by the way—the problem would disappear. For a while at that point I'd abstained from using my beloved's given name, only

referring to him with the aforementioned words or phrases. I applied a solution I had put to the test many times at school: ignore it and focus on learning. Studies "helped" in this more than school had—I was up to my neck in reports to file, and actually began to resent my student life. Come autumn, the smog rolled out, making the outdoors unappealing; I fell in love with Kraków instantly and fell out of love just as fast. Adding to this were issues that—would you believe it!—opted against staying behind in Warsaw and went along with us.

In early October, my mother invited herself over. At first, she said she would stay for the weekend, but when she arrived, it turned out... she had decided to move to Kraków, so she was going to stay on a few days longer and look for a job and a place to let. "A few days," yeah, right. She didn't even pretend to be looking: when I handed her my laptop so that she could search or tried to look for something myself, she immediately gave the same response I'd heard her trot out since childhood: "You're terrorising me! You're a terrorist!" It was no use reasoning with her that she couldn't just move in, that there was a watchman downstairs and if the owner found out we'd be in trouble, that I had to go to university and Iryd had his work hours, that there were only two sets of keys and mismatched schedules, so she had to leave with us ("What on earth am I supposed to do in the morning? It's cold, you're running me out like a dog, I had chills yesterday because of you!") or stay inside ("But I want to go for a walk later!"). At first, we welcomed her as best we could—we bought gourmet food, Iryd cooked meals for her, we pulled out a velour-coated mattress. She complained that the mattress was too close to Pinen's cage and that there was hay everywhere (kind of the norm with rabbits)—so what if there was nowhere else to put it. No apartment looked good enough for her, not to mention the job offers. Her visit slowly began to wear on my nerves, and she really pushed it too far when she dusted off her old rants against my being with Iryd (whom she still called Kasia) and went so far as to call me names and insult me. She repeated how her "efforts to give me the right upbringing and education had all come to nothing!" that I was "ungrateful for speaking this way to your mother!"; "You'll see for yourself when [Iryd] leaves you like you leave a dog when you move out." As I stood—in trousers, T-shirt, and flip-flops—I ran off and ended up on a bench in the boulevard near home. I sat there for an hour, crying. The hour gone, I came back home, grabbed the phone, and locked myself in the bathroom. I wrote to Iryd, asking where he was. He'd been running around the city looking for me. I put on my shoes and a hoodie and went out to meet him. He hugged me and I told him I wanted my mother gone,

that I had had enough of her. The next day, I was at the university until 6pm. Iryd came back from work after 5pm. My mother returned a while later, took her stuff and left. No "Goodbye," not even "Kiss my ass"—she didn't even bother to close the door behind her. Iryd only noticed she was gone after a few minutes. Good thing Pinen stayed put! When I got back I was surprised, but also relieved that she'd left. I blocked her number—I didn't feel like seeing someone who usurped the right to decide for me, who didn't respect me, and for whom the notions of acceptance and freedom of choice were devoid of any meaning, ever again. The psychological aftershocks of that visit reverberated for several weeks.

But Iryd and I did begin to come apart. He would spend more and more time biking alone—or so he said. Afterwards, I learned that he had biked, but also that he'd biked to a support group for trans folk or to meetings with someone else. My texts and calls often went without a reply, which worried me a lot. Once, he went to the Kraków Critical Mass, and after a while I thought I'd check if there wasn't any trouble there. I found the event on Facebook, and lo and behold, there was a comment by someone using the name Piotrek Iryd, with the aforementioned wild dog in the profile picture, writing "I'll be there 100%!" The picture began to feel clearer to me, but I didn't say anything to Iryd.

There was one moment that really left a mark. Financial trouble loomed on the horizon, but Kraków is the home town of Iryd's favourite punk band, so he saved for a ticket. The concert was taking place on a Sunday at the other end of the city; the following Monday I had classes starting at 8am, and he was due at work at the same time. Since the concert began at 8pm, I thought he'd be back by about midnight. He went, texted me when he got there, and I wished him good fun and found something else to do. Two or three hours later, I texted him asking how it was going. Silence. I thought it's just too loud, but time passed and there was still no reply. I began calling, but there was no answer. Fear crept in. I found the event on Facebook and saw some pictures and posts thanking people for coming. A while later, I got a text that everything was fine and that I should just go to sleep. I called back immediately, but he didn't answer. That was worrying. My fears were exacerbated by the shouts outside of my window—some client making it known he was dissatisfied with the services of an escort. Midnight came and went; I decided to take a bath and go to sleep, but I couldn't, all worried. I began looking up phone numbers for hospitals and obsessively refreshing the feed of a local news outlet to make sure there was no road accident—after all, he went by bike. 1am came and went, then 2am. I sent texts from time to time, tried calling again. In a bathrobe, I looked out of

the window—the only thing I could think to do. I stood there for an hour and a half; it's a wonder how I managed not to catch a cold on that chilly, smog-ridden night in November. I cried, afraid that he escaped, that he left me, or that something had happened to him. In the end, well after 3am, I saw a figure in the distance, drunkenly rambling along the road. It was Iryd! I closed the window, lay down on the floor all spent, and began to cry. He came back heavily drunk, but he came back! We went to sleep. As you can imagine, after a night like that and just two hours of sleep, I could barely stand up straight during eight hours of lab work. I couldn't make myself go to classes, so I got back home, grabbed a bite, and went to sleep. The question kept ringing in my head: "Why did my beloved act this way?" My anxieties sharpened—if he was just a few minutes late, I felt abandoned, like it meant that something was afoot.

There was another time like this after he went out with friends from work. A few hours later he was still out, and he didn't pick up or text me back. I found the number of a female co-worker of his and texted her, asking if everything was alright. She texted back that it was, but that I should talk to Iryd. I didn't know what was going on; I bombarded him with texts and calls, but got no reply. After a while, I got a short response from Iryd that he was going to grab some *zapiekanka* and then come home.[20] I was annoyed and worried at the same time. Everything else aside, what's the logic of buying *zapiekanka* on the town when you're this close to home and with a gaping hole in your wallet? It began to snow; I went out to the bus stop to wait for him. I stood, all nerves, while the snow fell down quietly and delicately. Total contrast. A good while passed before I noticed him coming over the bridge. I ran to hug him. All the anger went away, only relief remained—the stress dissipated.

The first time we really talked about our problem was on New Year's Eve 2015, which was a bit unfortunate given that we were playing hosts to Stasiu and his then-partner—but we locked ourselves in the bathroom and they didn't mind having a bit of time for themselves (every newly-made couple appreciates that). Yet what went down while we were locked together for more than an hour was mostly assurances that all would be fine, that we still loved one another, and that Iryd would never cut himself again, rather than making any serious attempts to deal with the problem. From that point onwards, I made sure to refer to my beloved in an

20 *Zapiekanka*—a type of baked sandwich made from half of a long roll cut lengthwise, traditionally topped with sautéed mushrooms and onions, cheese, and ketchup, occasionally referred to as "Polish pizza." Originally conceived in the 1970s, *zapiekanka* is widely considered Poland's national street-food dish.

impersonal manner, planning to switch to masculine forms eventually, which didn't come easy (old habits die hard). There was nothing I wanted more than for the love of my life to be happy; so in those days I often asked myself why the price of that had to be me, my own happiness? I did remember, though, his joy at seeing me use a masculine pronoun in a text to him—I kept it to myself that it was a typo because I saw how important it was to him. But I couldn't make out what our future held and became apprehensive about it.

In a way, I was under assault, a part of me was being torn down. Just as I'd settled into the life of a lesbian, that went out the window when it turned out I was living with a person who saw themselves as a man. This made me wonder who I was. I knew I wasn't straight or bi—men were not attractive to me at all. I liked girls more, though it was the kind of "liking" that's more about the aesthetics, nothing erotic. I decided I was in the "other" category and that I should make myself at home in that plus sign. The prospect of having sex with a man repulsed me and I dreaded the time that Iryd might "grow a penis." If that happened, where would our—already increasingly neglected—erotic life go? In spite of all this, I knew I loved Iryd for the person he was, not for his looks. There was no thought in my head about ending our relationship; I tried to come to terms with all of that while hoping that the inevitable consequences might not follow. I gradually came to accept the way things were, and while misunderstandings did happen, they never lasted more than a few hours.

There were other problems to deal with, though—of a financial kind. Owing to constant misgendering in the streets and poor work results Iryd abandoned his career in Greenpeace in late 2015. He found illegal employment in a local eco-friendly food store, but two months later, the employer got someone else for less. Then he freelanced as a pollster, but the premiums he was promised never came, everything being funnelled to the leader's account. In addition, we were hit by a bill for 2000 zlotys in back payment for electricity, in three instalments over the next three months, on top of the regular 100 zlotys bill. Iryd's parents gave us nothing—once in a blue moon, they transferred 100 zlotys with something like "You'll get more when you call/start living like people" (meaning: how we think is right) in the title, but he always gave the money back for fear they might get ideas and start up trouble somewhere down the line. Two of his aunts and a grandmother sent him money for holidays or birthdays. Iryd started skip diving—riding around with freegan friends collecting food from skips next to shops and markets after closing time. We discovered that shops throw out massive amounts of good food! Those boxes of

vegetables and fruits seriously lowered the burden on our sparse budget. He skipped with a trans mate of his known as Czopek, but also with a cis-heteronormative girl—whoever happened to join in. In addition, the saleswoman at the local greengrocer's sold us vegetables no one wanted for a penny. All that was left to buy was legumes, flour, and baked goods; we somehow managed to pinch a few pennies after paying the rent, which consumed nearly all of our income. My savings from the final year of high school and from the scholarship I got during the first year at the university were dwindling rapidly. There was no hope for any scholarship at my current university because I didn't submit the required papers—because I didn't have them. I found myself in a bit of a gap. To qualify for a welfare stipend, I had to come up with income data for my parents—but I had no contact with my father, so no data from him. With nothing to show, I had to produce a statement on the alimony I never got; absent that, the secretary at the department said I would need a death certificate or a statement from the debt collector that the alimony was irrecoverable. So what if I had personal reasons not to get myself into a lengthy court battle with an emotionally unstable man, which could well last for years. The administrators at the Warsaw University of Technology only shrugged, and so did the ones at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. Living alone and earning your own upkeep wasn't enough to justify the claim that you were running a separate household. One also needed an income above 1,000 zlotys a month, but also earnings of 800 zlotys or less per person. So what if we were a couple—our relationship hadn't been formalised. And since Poland doesn't recognise any union other than that between a woman and a man... In spite of good grades, I somehow missed out on a scholarship for learning achievements; I couldn't make head or tail of the justification. I had no contact with my so-called biological father, and as for the alimony—either I didn't get any or it all ended up with my mother; in any case, it never reached me. My mother wouldn't give me a penny. Picking up work on top of classes—where I either spent a full eight hours in the lab without a break or had a running schedule from 8am to 8pm with a couple of two-hour breaks—was an impossibility, and I needed the weekends to write those darned reports. I started rummaging through the stuff we had at home and listed books, clothes, and other "junk from the pad" on the OLX website.[21] Finally, the book rewards from all those competitions came to use. After Iryd's wardrobe change, all his old, women's clothes went out on Vinted. We still had some clothes left, and when we

21 OLX—a Polish platform for consumer-to-consumer trading, equivalent to eBay.

found ourselves short, we made up for it with whatever we could find for 2–3 zlotys in the bins at thrift stores. For the first time, I got to choose the kinds of clothes I wanted to wear, even as my budget got tighter. For the first time, a visit to a shop was something to look forward to. The 2–3 zlotys bins contained a lot of practically new clothes—that's the benefit of being size XXS or XS: a lot of folks buy clothes in those sizes hoping to thin out to fit them, but then fail and throw the lot out. By the way, I don't understand why people strive to get to a particular size, even when they look good enough the way they are. Somehow we made ends meet, but it was a serious challenge.

Then came Easter 2016. The sun was up, but mercury stayed below 15°C during the day and dropped as low as 6 or 7°C in the night—and heating just broke at our place, which neither the watchman nor the owner even tried to do anything about. We made plenty of food and I looked on in surprise at how much Iryd was able to eat; he had thus far been a rather reluctant eater. When not at the table, we stayed cooped up under two duvets and a blanket and talked. He told me a lot of things about himself that he had held back so far—about his real identity. I heard plenty of seemingly unimportant stories from his childhood or teens, and everything began to fall into place in this little puzzle called trans identity. He explained a great deal to me, so that I finally saw what was happening and understood. We apologised to one another—I to him for playing down the problem and his emotional issues, and he to me for failing to speak plainly and being evasive. I promised to use the right forms and his new name, but that remained a challenge, so I stuck with "love" and "kitty," both of which were OK. After the holiday break, I had classes until 8pm and he was going out skip diving after 8pm, so I knew I wouldn't find him at home. What I did find was a letter. I dove straight into it—it was from Iryd. He wrote that he could hold back no longer and had started taking hormones a few weeks before, but he assured me that everything was the same as far as him and me were concerned—that he loved me the same and hoped that I do him, though he would understand me whatever I chose. I quickly texted him that I was home and that I'd read it, that everything would be OK, and that I wanted him to come back safe with "shopping." When he returned, we hugged. I was surprised that he'd started taking hormones behind my back, but I understood why he'd done it. I assured him of my full support and asked him about the medication he used, and when he said it was in injections I immediately said I wouldn't give them. I faint when giving blood samples; I didn't even know how to go about it. It turned out he'd been doing them on his own. Another day, he told me

about his visit to a famous doctor from Kraków, about taking the first injection in the company of other guys like him. I admitted that I'd read his red notebook; he'd forgotten all about it and thought it was lost when we were moving. The notebook did get lost, but I've kept the letter to this day.

Initially, I didn't bring my narrow circle of friends up to date, but that lent a stuttering quality to our communications, so at one point, I shared the news with Agata, Daniel, and Ania, a fellow student. I found it difficult to put it into words so that someone from the outside would understand and I also feared they might reject me, but it all worked out. They received the news without asking any tricky questions, accepting the world (and Iryd) as they were. As for other acquaintances, the ones I exchanged holiday greetings with or went to class with, I held back. But these weren't folks I had any serious relationships with, so I didn't even care that they may eventually learn about it by word of mouth. I hadn't contacted my mother since her unfortunate visit, so I had even less inclination to tell her. When Piotrek started functioning as a "he," he finally gained a few reliable male mates and friends. Our intimate life also improved after this coming out—meaning, it came back. Although it was now mostly about him giving me pleasure, since he preferred not to be touched in his intimate regions and was satisfied to see me satisfied.

In view of the aforementioned financial problems, as well as new expenses (hormones) and the looming prospect of more to come (surgeries), I decided to change something in my life to break out of the vicious cycle of poverty. All self-help books about saving money assumed one had money to save. There were more and more news items about how programming was the future, about ever-growing numbers of job openings, about salaries high enough to make your head swim, even at entry level. I remembered how much enthusiasm Franka showed when talking about databases, that she never said it was hard work—quite the contrary. So I thought, why not? I started up some free Internet courses, found some free manuals, and began to teach myself using our budget laptop. A quick peek into the job openings followed by an analysis of a few threads on Internet forums and the perusal of a handful of articles led me to decide to become an Android app developer. Indeed, there's quite a bit that you only need to click through, and it wasn't as hard as it seemed. Besides, going into programming would hasten my emigration because it's a universal skill useful around the world. I thought about moving to Australia because they have clean air and lots of warmth; or Norway, also for the air. The smog really did wear me down. My beloved would also enjoy access to better medical care and would be able to afford the surgeries.

However, the idyll didn't last long; what got in the way was an accident. Don't worry, everyone's alive and well. As I mentioned, my skills as a cook are limited to reheating soup or making one-pot meals with lots of sauce. It was Saturday; Iryd was away for his veterinary technician course and he left me some soup to eat. I got hungry, so I put it on our electric cooker, as usual. I turned the knob, and all of a sudden the plate got all red and made a loud pop. None of the others would work; neither did any lights. I called Iryd; he picked up (the coming out did wonders to his skills in that regard). Luckily, his classes had ended and he was promptly back home. The watchman thought it was the fuse—it did indeed pop out, but when he pushed it back in, the cooker began to hum. He turned it off again and tried hard to come up with something else. He got the idea that he—without any training—would repair it on his own, but luckily Iryd had a mate who was an electrician. The watchman went away, relieved, though I'm not sure if it was more about not having to unscrew the cables from the cooker or about not having to deal with us, gender monsters. He had once let two girls into that studio flat, and now one of them looked like a teenage boy, dressed like one, and used male pronouns—and his voice was breaking. Iryd's mate arrived and safely uninstalled the cooker. He took a look around and decided the cable work in the house was a disaster. Meanwhile, Julia—an engineer we'd met in LGBT+ circles—said the cables could have been struck and there might be carbon monoxide seepage, so the whole installation had to be looked over. The owner didn't want to hear about it, so we decided to find a new place and new tenants for this one. It dawned on us why the previous tenants were so eager to leave the apartment. We had no trouble finding candidates, but it wasn't as easy with a new place for us—every apartment was financially beyond our reach, even though Iryd had finally found stable employment (a miracle in the Polish reality) at an IKEA, for three months with a view to an extension. We found a single-room apartment in the Azory neighbourhood—1,000 zlotys with everything, including electricity, for which prices in Kraków are full-on extortionate. We went to the place dressed in our cis-hetero best. The prefab block looked fine, and the apartment... It had newly-installed windows, a remade bathroom, and a corridor painted brick red. The floor in the room was raw concrete under some shabby covering and an old carpet; there was also a shiny plywood closet and a sofa bed that may well have been older than I was. The cramped kitchen had a new sink and old cupboards—some had wall mountings but stood on the floor. Luckily, there was a gas cooker, so nothing explosive. Aside from the toilet, the bathroom had a tub. The owner promised to deliver

a fridge. The lease was done under the table; on the one hand, it made me feel like crying—on the other, I knew we couldn't afford anything else and it made sense not to live in a place where the installation had been on the brink of short circuiting for a number of months—the likely cause of the astronomical bill we got that winter—and may even have been burnt through, so we took what was on offer. Mr. W. only asked us for one of our names to leave with the administrator and told us that should someone ask, we were friends of his daughter. He gave us a very honest account of himself and that the liability was his if someone found out about the lease, so we took it. I gave my data, Iryd introduced himself as Piotrek, and we got back to packing. The next day, we went to our new place for cleaning. Adam, a neighbour—a stereotypical tracksuit-wearing builder—helped Iryd throw out the old carpet and I did the dusting. Even though he'd only been on the hormones for a few months, the neighbour didn't suspect anything and everybody thought we were a normal cis-hetero couple. No one doubted that his name was Piotrek. Checkmate, those who claim to always recognise a trans person! Friends of a friend helped us move pretty much in one day once the cleaning was done, running there and back again a few times by car, and so, in June 2016, we moved to the Azores. The ones in Kraków.

The semester was drawing to a close and I passed my exams without a hitch, but I still decided to drop out and focus on programming. Moving to Kraków helped me see how much stuff we'd amassed, so I set about compiling an inventory as preparation for our planned emigration. A number of the things went to the "for sale" pile, and that became the other thing I did next to learning programming. The sofa didn't work as a bed, so we threw it out and bought a mattress on Allegro for 140 zlotys (delivery included)—low-value auctions on Allegro used to be a thing back then; today, we're inundated with products from AliExpress.[22] World Youth Days were right around the corner and Kraków would become a virtually closed city during the event. Everybody knew staying put wasn't an option. Me and Iryd decided to go on holiday—I hadn't had any for several years. I found an offer for a ten-day stay in Czarna Góra for 500 zlotys for two and return tickets for both of us for 80 zlotys. Czopek became Pinen's uncle for the duration—as it turns out, mutual aid isn't just about LGBT+ issues, but also caring for one another's rabbits! The day before our departure was Iryd's last day at work and he came back with sad news: they hadn't offered him the extension. The managers came up with crappy excuses like "You're

22 Allegro.pl—an e-commerce platform including consumer-to-consumer services.

a bit of a layabout," but we both felt they found having a trans employee less than appealing. How else would you justify letting go of someone who's always on time and has the best sales results? We didn't care and went on our trip anyway. The three months of employment at IKEA meant private medical insurance, so he did the tests he needed done prior to transition, and I dealt with some that I'd been putting off because I had no insurance (mother crossed me out from hers at some point). When we reached the mountains, the lady proprietor also took us for a regular cis-hetero couple and even went so far as to decide she didn't need our ID cards—we told her who we were and that was that. We enjoyed play-acting as simple cis--heteronormative people—it's quite fun, all that theatre! And it goes to show what the LGBT-phobic folks are full of, with their claims that "IT shows." The holiday was splendid—beautiful nature, nice trails for walking, lots of time together. It helped us rebuild what had begun to crumble. We revived our intimacy—not just sex, but also hugging, kissing, walking hand in hand. After his coming out, he had enjoyed taking me by the hand or embracing me in public. I never had any problems with hugging or walking hand in hand; I was happy that he'd dealt with this problem. But our holiday ended eventually and we had to get back to our Kraków reality.

Meanwhile, Daniel took notice of the problems we were facing and suggested that Piotrek sign up with a recruitment agency that helped him find a good job in Szczecin. Jobman also had an office in Kraków and cooperated with plenty of stores, so Iryd worked the checkout at Tesco, Simply and Makro stores—whoever had an opening on a given day. Surprisingly, even though the contract was of the same type, the agency paid better money. I submitted papers at the Information Science department of the Pedagogical University of Kraków to add a nice sheen to my CV. I began to respond wholesale to all job openings in Kraków; I even went directly to the employers. Jula recommended me to her employer, but nothing came of it. Occasionally, I got a call from an HR person, but it never went beyond a brief chit-chat.

Our funds were dwindling as fast as my job prospects, but here Jula helped us out, inspired by the notion of mutual aid: she lent us some money for the apartment and would sometimes visit us for dinner, bringing with her all the stuff that you couldn't find in skips. She also opened a private laundry service for us because we had no washing machine at the apartment. You can wash your clothes by hand, but it's not as easy with bed linen or towels. We often came over to her place in Bronowice: she would set the machine rolling and regale us with many queer stories, involving herself as well as others, including some she heard second-hand.

She also introduced me to the world of Linux and helped me install it on our dilapidated laptop. In early December, we filed a case along with request for a fee waiver. When you want to change your sex identification in Poland, you have to sue your parents because that's what some sketchy article of the Civil Code demands.[23] We really wanted to avoid giving our address; we also knew we would be leaving Kraków soon. Julia came to the rescue again, offering her address for the correspondence, securing authorisation, and agreeing to accept mail for Piotrek and send him scans.

Unable to find work in Kraków, I decided to try my luck in other cities—anywhere but Warsaw. I started sending CVs to companies in the Tricity area,[24] and lo and behold, I got a response! There were a few phone calls that led nowhere, but I also got invited for live interviews with two companies. The smog was really wearing me down, so Iryd and I decided to go to the Tricity for three or four days to look for an apartment; we assumed things would go our way and I'd land one of the jobs. He remembered he once met a queer couple in Warsaw who were from Gdynia—Sav and Agares. I don't know how he does it, but he makes tons of friends; meeting new people is much harder for me—aside from schoolmates like Daniel or Agata, my friends were mostly his friends first. Wherever he goes, he meets someone new. He called them up and Agares offered to let us stay at their place (Sav was going away somewhere). We came in with a suitcase of our stuff, which we left behind with Agares, taking the empty suitcase with us. Our host worked in IT, which proved to me that no one in IT cared if you were a unicorn. On that note, it's a strange coincidence: I started calling trans folk unicorns just before the Trans-Fuzja Foundation picked them up as an icon.

We went to Gdynia ahead of the holidays. Czopek took care of Pinen when we were away. I had two interviews in my diary and we planned to look around for places to live in the meantime. Unfortunately, OLX came up empty for apartment listings. There were a few, but the people who put them up were weird, like one guy who'd listed a place but wasn't sure if he was going to let it out. There were also plenty of outdated offers. Only one turned up, so we took it. We signed a contract, that is, a piece of paper with handwriting that said: "I, Ms. XY, let the apartment at Morska Street to Ms. AN." Here, too, the owners took us for a cis-heteronormative couple. The second interview led to a phone call the day after—I was told I'd got

23 For more on the legal framework of sex identification change in Poland, see the Introduction, p. XII.

24 Tricity—see n. 1 on p. 1.

the job. I was so shocked I just sat down on the stairs and me and Piotrek stayed like that for a long while.

We were back in Kraków the day before Christmas Eve and set about cooking borscht and soya cutlets in Greek style. The next day, we hosted a Christmas Eve party in our apartment for all of our friends who had no family other than the genetic one that they don't care for. Jula came, as did Racuch and Mania; LGBT+ density hit record highs. Everyone brought something to eat—aside from the aforementioned dishes, there were lentil pasties, gingerbread, and oranges. We sang carols and rejoiced. We also said goodbye to our Kraków friends, to our Kraków life. We had one-way tickets to the Tricity for December 30th, even though I would only start working in February, because we wanted to start the new year in the new place. After Christmas Eve came the time for packing. We couldn't afford to send everything by delivery service, so we trawled through Allegro and bought two of the largest bags we could find at a reasonable price—two 200-litre cloth bags. We also had the suitcase we bought for our trip to the mountains, a large brown bag, and countless cloth and plastic bags. But we only had two hands each. The big black bags were like black holes—so much stuff went in and there was still room left. In the end, we finished packing, rolled up the mattress and wrapped it in cling film, and squeezed papers and other stuff into the rabbit cage to hit the 30kg weight limit—that was the only package we could afford to send, and one the courier never came to pick up. Luckily we quickly found friends who took it off our hands, and after a few calls to the delivery service it was finally picked up a few days later. Meanwhile, us two and our bundles—two 200-litre bags, one 100-litre suitcase, the mattress, the brown bag, the laptop case, three backpacks, an IKEA bag, the rabbit carrier, and my hat from Vietnam—went on our way. Mr. W. drove us to the station in his van—a really decent guy. Somehow we squeezed onto the train and faced the astonished guard. He said he couldn't let us cram the compartment like that but wouldn't pull out any of the bags himself, so Piotrek carried them to the front of the car, behind the engine, and sat there, while I took my seat with the rabbit between my legs and the backpack on my knees. In spite of these initial difficulties, the other passengers cheered us on; the guard took offence and went off, and the other one said we would have to pay for luggage tickets, but also that there was no luggage car. In the end, he never got around to finalising this transaction. After a few hours, we reached Gdynia and somehow managed to roll out of the train. I've never been as happy to put my foot on the platform! Finally some wind and fresh air! To complete the scene, the heel of my high boot fell off just after I left the train. So there I stood

with our stuff while Piotrek and another friend of a friend carried it to the guy's car. After a few runs they were done; we squeezed into the vehicle and minutes later we were there. We carried our stuff inside; I was overjoyed. We straightened out the mattress to have somewhere to sleep, then took out the bed linen and other necessaries, let Pinen out to kick out his stiff legs, grabbed a bite, and fell onto the mattress.

Tricity

Our apartment in the Tricity was a real upgrade—it had a small room we used as bedroom, a bathroom with a washing machine and a shower, and a sizeable living room with a kitchenette. It had no furniture other than kitchen cabinets and a walk-in closet, but we found some chairs and a table, so we made do. Besides, it was located on top of a library—a dream come true for a bookworm like me. Jobman didn't have an office in the Tricity, so Iryd returned to Greenpeace in his "new form." I was about to start work myself. The local train had a stop ten minutes away on foot; I hopped on at Gdynia Stocznia station and got off at the Wrzeszcz station about a half an hour later, and then took another 10–15 minute walk to get to the office. I kept myself and my life story to myself, playing the part of a normal girl with a boyfriend—normal from their perspective, the way people thought of these things. I talked about work or not at all, shut off under my headphones. I immediately saw how little I knew, but I suppose the team assumed that would be the case and I received on-the-job training for the tasks I was expected to perform. After a few months of fairly intense work, stagnation set in and empty schedules—often you came in and there was nothing that needed doing. I was paid for being there for the specified duration and performing specified tasks during that time, so I wasn't bothered about an empty schedule. You could always find some brainy article and read it, or at least pretend to. My co-workers became chattier in those days, but I stayed silent, helped along by the placement of my desk. I worked with an all-male crew made up of brazenly normal guys: wives/girlfriends, kids, apartment loans, games, technological gimmicks—these were their interests. At the time, no social group was being particularly targeted in the media and there was no contested issue of public debate (aside from educational reforms), so the conversations never went there. Much more was being said about changes within the company and the move to new offices, scheduled for September. But the primary topic was loans—everyone was either paying one back or planning to take one out to buy an apartment. Here, too, I was faced with incredulity for not wanting to take out a loan. And I didn't even want a car, inconceivable!

Well, I just like public transport, I care about the environment, and I don't enjoy travelling by car—besides, I'm doing perfectly fine facing danger in traffic as a pedestrian, so I wouldn't even dream of taking the wheel myself; it was a scary prospect. Every time someone had a birthday they brought in a cake, so I decided to announce I was a vegan. They said they never met anyone as radical as me! How's that for culture shock?

Justice is swift in Szczecin, so Piotrek's first hearing was scheduled for February 22nd—which was unfortunate, since that was the day after my birthday and he had to leave already the 21st. Obviously, the parents opposed his demands and hired a lawyer who produced dozens of pages in legalese. They set about drafting motions demanding legal incapacitation, admission of some witnesses, dismissal of some expert evidence as unreliable, and a whole host of things unrelated to the case at hand. As justification for the claim that their child was a normal girl, they trotted out a massive album of photos from his childhood, with pictures from birthdays and holidays, as well as one depicting the huge statue of the Mother of God in their home and the infamous sturgeon photo. It was a picture taken during Christmas Eve. Piotrek was four or five at the time. It shows him and his cousin standing at the table upon which is a sturgeon, front and centre. Knowing how that court worked, we were hoping for a swift ending, but that wasn't granted. On my birthday, I sat at work all cramped up; I barely managed to gulp some soup and a sandwich at home and went to bed. The next day, I was jittery over the hearing itself, in a way feeling the pain my beloved was exposed to. Ours is a fairly strong union and we often feel the feelings of the other, even at a distance. I was also afraid his parents would try to abduct him; you never know what to expect when faced with people who wear their jackets over deep layers of authoritarianism and aggression. Luckily, Julia travelled from Kraków to Szczecin as a witness, so that to me felt like a safeguard. I couldn't muster the strength to appear as a witness myself, to face his parents. They would dispute my assertions, anyway—they always maintained, even in their motions to the court, that I was responsible for making their child "abnormal," that I was violent and unstable and that I forced him to transition for my own gain. Before noon, right after the hearing, Piotrek called me and said there would be more of them and that he and Jula were running off to catch the train. I picked them up after work from the station in Gdynia; I was pretty unpleasant to them due to all the psychological and physical stress—I'm afraid that's how I roll. But a warm meal and some hugging restored my mood and attitude. Two more hearings had been scheduled for May, on consecutive days, and witnesses proposed by the

parents would be heard then; in the meantime, Krzysiek, Piotrek's mate from Kraków, would testify online because he didn't feel like crossing the whole country by train if he could do the good work from his own home. Krzysiek is more than a decade older than us, has kids, and is a believer, so he once tried to reason with Piotrek's parents, hoping to find common ground with them as a parent and a Christian, but after a few weeks of lengthy disputes, he gave up—it just didn't get through. They kept insisting against all facts that "Kasia is in a cult because of that Ania! She's forcing her to be like that! There is no such thing—why does SHE do that to us?!"

Somewhat dejected and appalled by the progress of the case, we went on living our life, looking forward in particular to the end of my first month at work and the salary—the kind I'd never seen before. The day I got it, my shoe broke on the way to work, so when I left, Iryd and I did the rounds of the stores. For the first time ever, we bought exactly the shoes and clothes we wanted to have. We came back home bearing several massive bags and a wallet slimmed by a few hundred zlotys. Unicorns were in fashion at the time, and I think I bought all the shirts that had them on, because I love unicorns! I also bought a charming dress. About two weeks later, we went to another store and proceeded to shore up our supplies of clothes—our old ones were almost worn through, and you can't keep wearing the same four blouses all the time. In addition, I was able for the first time to walk into a store and choose the food I liked. I could pick a higher-quality jam, try chestnut cream, or buy nuts. Piotrek was able to buy soya sausages. In spite of all these expenses, we still had a pretty sum left even after paying the rent, and we put that aside for future medical expenses and the planned emigration. When necessary, we shared our funds with others—like when Julia lost her job and needed some money, which we could wire her so that she could pay her bills.

While in the Tricity, my social life came back from the brink, mostly thanks to Tolerado.[25] Support groups help you meet other people and exchange information, but they do also provide support. Besides, their focus is the visibility of the LGBT+ community; they strive to organise awareness-raising activities, which is quite a challenge in the Polish reality. The support group for trans folk which we started attending in January also provided immeasurable help during the trying time of the hearings. It made me realise I was not alone, that a whole crowd of people had lived

25 Tolerado (full name: Stowarzyszenie na rzecz osób LGBT Tolerado) is an NGO engaged in LGBT+ rights activism, established in 2012 as an outgrowth of the Tricity chapter of the Campaign Against Homophobia. It is the organiser of the Tricity Pride Days and the Tricity Pride Parade.

through this process, even if their parents were not as radical. Each of us had been affected in some way by that LGBT-phobia, and this unity, this solidarity was a massive source of self-assurance and strength for taking the next step while also addressing unresolved problems, speaking out. The meetings happened only once a month, but it was something. There, we met A., Karolina, and Konrad, whom we went on to meet with outside of the group. I immediately got on with the people there. We became particularly friendly with A. We often invited him over because both Iryd and I prefer to meet at home over some cake and tea or a good dinner, which our guests always appreciate. A. liked to visit because it let him get away from his sister and her boyfriend. I began to take a more active part in conversations, rather than just listening in. A. is an archetype of a gay man with all the theatrical gestures, a frequent visitor to shopping centres—which is why we called him "Mall Girl," though he preferred "A-mile" because you can see he's gay from a mile off. We mostly talked about our daily lives, though there were plenty of stories about unhappy loves from the past as well as the present. We mostly met as a threesome—I continued to struggle to get acquainted with people or even meet them on my own. In addition, many people forgot that phones can also be used to make calls and send texts, so if you're not on Facebook, you're suddenly out of the loop—and I recently deleted my account after a flurry of unpleasant messages from multiple fake accounts created by Piotrek's parents.

We lived at Morska Street in Gdynia for only three months because the owners started getting in our hair about how we did too much washing, used the oven too much, and many other things, even though we had offered to cover the additional costs. Besides, I was annoyed by the constant breaks in service of the local train network, so the time came for us to find a new place. What we found was a two-room apartment in the Stogi district, overlooking the Dead Vistula, with rent pretty much the same as our previous abode, so we mobilised Karolina and her car and made the move. With all the practice we had doing that, it took us no time at all, and so, in April 2017, we became citizens of Gdańsk. Our new place had a bedroom, a bathroom with a tub, a walk-through living room with a table and some chairs, and a kitchen. The trams had a denser timetable, so it took me less time to get home, though they, too, suffered breakdowns. We bought a bike for me and Piotrek brought his own from Kraków with the help of a friend, so we could go out on trips, making use of the beautiful bike route in the area. As May approached, so did the next hearings—and also the Pride Parade. It was to be my first. In Warsaw, I was always too afraid to go because of the ever-present menace of

counter-demonstrations—and in Kraków, there was awful smog the day of the march, and then a massive downpour, as well as assaults by counter-demonstrators. I only learned afterwards that you can become involved in the preparations for the parade, and I promised myself not to forget about that the following year. However, the hearings were scheduled a few days before the event. Piotrek left in the morning of day one so as not to miss the first hearing and would spend the night at a friend's and come back home the following day, after the other hearing. His being away hit me harder than it did before. I forced myself to eat soup to just have anything in my system, and I tried to stay behind at work as long as I could (we didn't have strict working hours, so you could always take back the overtime on another day). That was easier said than done since there were no tasks to complete. I awaited the news. This time, some of the witnesses refused to testify, and one cousin had conspired with an aunt about their testimonies, but the scheme fell through when they both claimed to have had recent contact with Iryd while he was in middle school, but then said that it took place in 2002, when he was only just starting primary school. I think the court dismissed their testimony as irrelevant; it also rejected the sturgeon photos as proof and appointed one forensic expert instead of the five that the parents had wanted. It's a good thing my beloved knows everybody everywhere and invited his friends into the audience because the parents, the aunt, and the cousin had plotted to block the entrance and hold him in until he agreed to go somewhere or other with them—which he didn't feel like doing; his friends helped him break out of the blockade. I collected him from Gdańsk station, where we leaped into one another's arms; I was in tears and exhausted. We went home and I ate and went to sleep to soothe my nerves. All we could do now was wait for the forensic expert to be named and set up a meeting with them.

But the parade was just around the corner, so that melted the sadness away. I dressed up as colourfully as I could, put flowers in my hair, and we went there with Nina, a friend from the support group. When you want to join an event like that in Poland, you'd better not go alone. Once there, we met plenty of our friends, bought a small flag and took some of the free paper ones, and we were on our way. I was happy and proud to be there, among so many wonderful people! There was music; there was the Rainbow-Radical Camp with unicorn-shaped balloons; there was plenty of joy and happiness.[26] People waved their flags, danced, shouted slogans

26 Obóz Tęczowo-Radykalny (Rainbow-Radical Camp)—a play on the name of the far-right organisation Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny (National-Radical Camp).

like “Love! Equality! Tolerance!” A happy, joyful event. The route of the march wasn’t long—from around the Zaspa train station to the Galeria Manhattan shopping centre. Time passed slowly, but the march was over pretty fast. Along the way, we were constantly “accompanied” by counter--demonstrators—sad, aggressive people dressed in shirts with images of hussars, the sign of Fighting Poland,[27] and the idols of the National-Radical Camp, bearing white banners filled with hateful slogans. Of course, there were the classics, like “No faggoting” or “These lot want to educate your children.” They shouted something at us, but the voices of those singing in the equality march rang louder. I tried to move closer to the middle, avoiding the sides, because the counter-demonstrators can sometimes spit at people or grab at them. They did try to break through to us, but they were stopped by the police. At the end of the march, we were treated to a thank-you speech by the organisers, but also to a massive hateful banner hanging on the nearby skyscraper—I can’t recall what it actually said. What struck me was that once the organisers thanked us, the march virtually disappeared into thin air within minutes. The flags were gone, the people split. We moved as a group toward Nina’s car, hoping to avoid getting beaten, spat on, or showered with objects—in other words, hoping we would not be assaulted. The quick disappearance of the march made the underlying fears apparent. When we’re in a big group, we’re strong; but when we separate, we hide among the crowd. I really don’t know how several thousand people could disperse so quickly. Luckily, we got back to the car and reached home safely. At the march, I was accosted by two girls from work, who were on a completely different team. Afterwards, we shared knowing smiles at work, but they also kept it to themselves that they had participated in such an event. Whichever way you cut it, the IT community is pretty conservative in its social outlook, and though my co-workers may not have been among those shouting at the marchers, they were not particularly keen on the “rotten West,” “multi-culti,” or “radical leftism.” The girls would soon change employers, but that was due to changes within the company.

27 Known colloquially as *Kotwica* (Anchor) due to its shape, the symbol of Polska Walcząca (Fighting Poland)—an anchor made up of the letters P and W—was used during World War II as a means of propagating resistance against Nazi occupation by the Polish Underground State. After 1989, the symbol was eagerly embraced by right-wing and nationalist circles. During the Women’s Protest against the tightening of abortion laws (late 2020—early 2021), an attempt was made to reclaim the symbol by stylising the W in the shape of woman’s breasts; this was met with court sanction on the basis of a law protecting the symbol (which was passed in 2014 by the liberal majority then in government). The same law is yet to be applied against members of right-wing groups.

Coming out helped me and Iryd recover our sex life, but our lives wouldn't have changed as much if it wasn't for us leaving behind our financial anxieties once I found work. We got intimate more often, but he felt that something was missing, so he decided to buy a strap-on 3-in-1 dildo—for wearing, playing, and pissing. When it arrived after a few weeks, well, we had to test it out. I wasn't particularly enthusiastic about it; not that it caused me pain or discomfort. I was still having sex with the same person, just with this "added element," as we called it. As much as this "Iryd accessory" (another name we used) proved to be a pleasant surprise, I didn't become a fan, which can't be said about my beloved. From that point on, erotic toys have been his hobby. At the outset, we used it more often, as you do when you get a new toy; it also gave my love a healthy dose of psychological comfort. But we didn't forget our previous fantasies and games. One thing that did rattle our sexual life was our meeting with the forensic expert, a man who specialised in sexology and sexual crimes. An interesting choice: was being trans a crime now? Iryd wasn't particularly keen on talking about their conversation because those four hours felt to him basically like he was being molested, so intimate were the questions he faced. Add to this the place of the meeting, a small room at a parish in the Cisowa district of Gdynia, and voilà! Long-term distaste for any sexual activities guaranteed. I didn't mind this brief abstinence: the way I operate, I often don't feel these urges myself; they usually follow from proximity, like long hugs or kisses, what you might call switches. I never masturbated because I didn't feel like doing it, and I also didn't feel like I needed to learn about my own body. In practice, it was Iryd who discovered my body, as I did his. And now, I got to do it again. Hormones change the body—it's not just about chin hair, increasingly furry legs, or a hairy chest, but also changes to the genitals. The clitoris grows a little, which, together with the burgeoning pubic hair, makes it look like... a sea mouse. We started calling it mousey and still do. I suppose alternative names help reduce dysphoria or improve aspects of self-acceptance. They also helped me talk more openly about my needs and erotic fantasies, though it remains a very intimate sphere for me, one I only share with Piotrek. I don't mind it when someone talks about their sexual life, when others talk about themselves in my presence, but I don't want to share my experiences like that.

It was somewhere around that time, though I'd be hard put to say when exactly, that Iryd began to call me "Bun" (*Bułka*), and I picked up on it myself. I feel much more comfortable calling myself Bun than I do using the name I've been assigned at birth. That's how many of my friends

know me—when Piotrek talks about me, he talks about Bun. I felt that the nickname, as accidental as it seemed at first, is really more in line with who I am. I'd been musing about changing my name a few years back, even just for public use—the ID card I almost never use can say what it wants—but I couldn't find a good fit. Becoming Bun felt so natural, so simple. When I think about it, I find that I'd already wanted a less conventional name in childhood. I remember attending a ballet performance by older classes where the emcee was a girl by the name of Delfina; I liked that so much at the time that I wanted that name, but my mum took it as a joke and that was that. I don't want it anymore; I prefer Bun now. Somehow, it expresses me, makes up my own category within queerdom. Nowadays, I talk about many things, like clothes, by saying they're Bun-like or un-Bun-like. This was when I first felt good in my own clothes because I chose them myself—unicorn or flower t-shirts, long, flowery skirts, colourful, simple pants. No highlighting the waistline or the bust (fortunately, still flat), or the legs. No low cuts, no laces, none of the other womanly weirdness. I freed myself from gendered clothing and began to buy whatever I liked best—though that usually meant children's clothes because I'm of slim build and that's the size that works best on me. Occasionally I get something from the women's section. I once found a shirt I liked in the men's department, but it was much too big. I continued to favour used clothes and the 3 zlotys box at the thrift store, a real treasure trove. I don't care what my ID card has under "sex"—it's just a piece of plastic that means nothing to me. Sex is a category the same way height or birthplace is: a box to fill with pre-determined content. Meanwhile, what it means socially is much more significant; maybe that's why I feel so good among other people from the community—with them, I can be myself instead of playing a part that society wants me to play. I've been a fairly good actor in school plays, but it's harder for me to replicate that in real life because I still always end up as an outcast. But that's led me into the LGBT+ community, which is a good, comfortable, and friendly place that makes me feel free. My identity or orientation, my way of life—that's not an issue at all. Together, we can laugh off the stereotypes, toxic masculinities and femininities, the artificial division of roles, personalities, clothes, cosmetics, and the rest, on the basis of strictly defined categories. Since I began attending the meetings of the Tolerado group, I began to feel more like a part of the community, more at home, like with

* Courtney Wirthit, "Confessions of a Demisexual," *Plan A Magazine*, https://planamag.com/confessions-of-a-demisexual/ [author's note].

the family that everyone always talks about. This means I'm a part of a group, it means there's someone I can rely on if I face problems, people who always show understanding and support me the best way they can.

One day, while trawling through the Net, I chanced upon a comic about demisexuality.* I read it once, and then again, and it sounded familiar. That's how *I* operate! I felt relieved that there are other people like me; that I'm not the weirdo some said I was. I understood myself, the fact that I don't feel attracted to anyone but Iryd; I found the cause of my problems with relationships. It finally became clear why erotic subplots in literature or films don't work on me. I was overjoyed because someone gave a name to this phenomenon, and names always resonate with people more than descriptions do. Someone illustrated and explained them in an incredibly simple, clear, and accessible way. It gave me hope that, in this excessively sexualised world where sex is often nothing more than a product for sale, a consumable good like a ready-made dish, people could still understand this notion, stop pointing fingers at people on the asexuality spectrum—which is something that doesn't only happen outside of the community, but also among LGBT+ folk. It's a hugely unpleasant phenomenon, sowing division where we should be focussing on supporting one another, on sticking together. I immediately shared the comic and the discovery it prompted in me with Iryd. He replied that it was true, everything fit exactly right. I didn't share the news with anyone else because I'm a bit withdrawn, but also because I didn't feel like I had to—the people around me know I'm with Iryd and sometimes take us for a regular cis-hetero couple (for example, at work), while those within the community know about his transsexuality; I have no idea what they think about me, but I don't care. I didn't feel like sharing for fear it might be shrugged off. After all, many people think that the asexuality spectrum, including demisexuality, is unnatural and reflective of the absence of particular experiences. I didn't have the strength to engage with them. It's hardly a secret, so if someone asked me, I would tell them. In fact, this is the first time I'm going public with the news. Yes, I am demisexual. I am a demisexual Bun.

Sometime in summer or autumn, Tolerado was visited by an unusual couple: Łucjan and Zuza. Zuza sat quietly, gazing at her shoes, and Łucjan chattered incessantly, often praising Zuza to the heavens. In those days, the number of people coming to the support group meetings was dwindling rapidly; I was always there, as were Iryd, Konrad, and Karolina. A handful of others came in occasionally, but many never returned. It didn't bother us; once we were done, we continued our meeting at a local bar,

pizzeria, or falafel spot. On this occasion, we shared a tram with Łucjan and Zuza going home—as pupils of the Arts High School, they lodged in a dorm by the Galeria Madison shopping centre. I quickly found common ground with Łucjan, and so did Iryd, and we stayed in touch. We visited them a few times at the dorm; they showed us their stick insects, which they kept secretly. I learned that the Arts School is a place where you can do as you please, a very tolerant place, as you'd expect from one that's focussed on the arts. Owing to different lifestyles—theirs as high school pupils, ours as working adults—we had few opportunities to meet since the dorm closed up at 8pm and visitors were also admitted only sparingly... On the other hand, that autumn, I was introduced to Antek. He'd met Iryd in Kraków, but he got tired of studying in the ancient city of Prince Krak and decided to return to his native Gdynia to start his studies again from scratch. At first, I found him scary: a thin, bald man who kept parodying typical Polish gestures in his own subtle way, like when he squatted like a stereotypical tracksuit-wearing lad to eat a cake, commenting audibly all the while, which made me think he was being dead serious. I only learned a bit later that this was his attitude, that he parodies a lot. Antek brought with him a bag of stuff we had left with some friends—mostly books we put up for sale on OLX. We continued our efforts to sell everything we didn't have use for before emigrating.

We were still in the Tricity when I noticed the rising wave of hate. The fact that the Pride Parade was met by counter-protests is normal in Poland, but even though Iryd did well at passing—acting in public as if he was of the sex he felt was his—he still often got called "Faggot!" on public transport in the middle of the day. While on the beach on a Sunday afternoon, we would sometimes hear someone shout "Oi, look, lesboes!" As time passed, we heard more and more of those shouts. We usually ignored them, moving away from the speaker so as not to provoke them, since we didn't really stand a chance against a tracksuit lad who spends all his days at the gym, and you never know when he might feel like breaking someone's jaw.

Things at work started going downhill. The location switch coincided with a change in the central managing office somewhere in the US or UK, which prompted a change in strategy. Layoffs began, which seriously affected my mood. Everyone expected that our department would be the next to get hit because we hadn't done anything new for a longer while. We did as much as we could to weather the storm. In addition, a new member joined our team—a final-year student with a year's worth of experience, and yet he took control of everyone and the whole project as if

he was the boss. No one dared challenge him, or at least they didn't care and just did as they were told. He really got in my hair because of the misogyny he proudly wore on his sleeves. I'd rather not think how things may have been if he'd known more about me. Thus far, my team valued my contributions, recognising my work ethic and diligence, but the new colleague found faults with everything I did, even the name I gave to a meaningless file or variable. Work became more and more mentally exhausting; more and more often, I counted down the hours until I could leave, until the weekend. I tried to find another job, but nothing came up. And we couldn't leave Poland before Iryd changed his personal data and underwent a hysterectomy, due to both massive dysphoria and increasing issues from these parts.

My fragile psyche was put to another trial. I decided to give my mother a chance. We exchanged a few emails, and a few weeks later, she came to Gdańsk—even though I asked that we take it step by step. Fortunately, she found accommodation in a worker's hotel, a huge relief. I didn't need to out Iryd to her because she'd already found out about him via Facebook; I'm quite sure I already mentioned that she liked to comb through the Internet and stalk people. I met her in town and we talked—partly about nothing in particular, and partly about how I'd hurt her feelings. I felt bad during our meeting, I felt like running away. I thought my mother had changed, that she understood something, but it was all an illusion. I remember I had the next day off, but I told her I was working to avoid having to see her again. Her stay was mercifully brief and she was off very soon. I needed to recharge after meeting her; Iryd bought me some valerian drops to soothe the nerves, and I began to take them to work to help me with the stress.

To make matters worse, after a few months in the new place, mould appeared—or, more likely, it had been there all the time, but someone had painted it over and it took this long for it to break through. Because of our experiences with renting apartments, we immediately let the owners know we were moving out in a month's time (as per the contract) and began to look for a new place. The prices had gone way up over those few months, but we managed to find a studio apartment in the Przymorze district. This time, the owner wanted the data for both tenants, so the unchanged data in Iryd's ID card prompted a doubtful look, but he quickly jotted down what he needed and went away. The apartment had the same setup as the place in Stogi, minus the bedroom—the magic of prefab tower blocks. It had horrid carpeting and ancient furniture; we took the latter down to the basement, tore off the carpeting, cleaned up the place, and made it vaguely presentable. The window would not open, but the owner promised to change it

within days. We packed our stuff and moved again, with help from Antek and public transport. Having moved so many times already, I learned to pack and unpack in a quick and logistical manner. Every move showed us how much useless stuff we'd generated, so we chose one of our bags to be a "pad junk bag" in the new apartment and threw everything we decided to put on sale in there. The added benefit of the apartment was that it was close to the home of A., which meant he could visit us even more often and we sometimes joined him when he walked his dog. Meanwhile, we started thinking about expanding our family, meaning adopting another rabbit, but the prospect of emigration made us apprehensive about the added logistical burden, so the plan was sadly shelved until later.

Then I decided to get in touch with Grandma after some two years of silence. I used to think I only visited Grandma because my mother told me to—then, I realised it was just another relationship she pretty much kept under control. When I reached out to her for the first time, on her sixty-ninth birthday, she reacted as if nothing had ever happened. At first, I called her every few weeks and told her about work, the films I saw, my rabbits; I reassured her that I was eating well and explained to her the particulars of a vegan diet. Grandma is a very open-minded person, tolerant, loath to barge into other people's lives. She doesn't drag out dirt from the past, doesn't hang up on the years of silence. Once, she wanted to talk with me about Piotrek, but I somehow evaded the issue; she didn't push further, and I think she learned more on her own. For more than a year now, we've been in contact like the best of friends! We talk often, by phone or through communicators—she recently bought a smartphone for the purpose! I found a new love for my grandma. I'm glad I took that step and revived our relationship, broken off two or three years before because of unfounded fears over lack of acceptance—which my mother did a fair bit to stoke. She was the one who made me go there; my mother was always opposed to my grandma, always highlighting her vices and even making some up from time to time. I feel Grandma always loved me the same and that hasn't changed at all. It's the quality of the relationship that's changed, not her love for me. I've never been as close with my grandpa, but there were no issues on his part—Grandma probably found some way to explain everything to him.

My mother hadn't changed one bit, and didn't work anything out. Now and then, I'd send her a text or call her to tell her that I was going to the cinema or that I'd eaten something good, but she always turned toward the past and kept repeating like a broken record, "You left me like a dog in a rubbish heap!" "I gave you so much support, I even went later to that

equality parade," "Why did you do that?" I don't really know what she meant by "that." Me moving out for the studies she chose for me? My relationship? My desire to lead my own life? I had no way of knowing. My mother began to argue with me again, pulling out various things from the past. Without mine and Iryd's consent, without consultation, with her severely limited understanding of trans identity, she communicated to my grandma that Piotrek is a trans man, and then she boasted about it to me and said that Grandma was shocked to hear it. Ruthless and direct as she is, she probably did it in a fairly heavy-handed fashion. My grandma didn't talk about it with me, even though it was after we got back in touch. The elders tend to show more tolerance than middle-aged people do. Piotrek's grandma, who is past eighty, had also seemed surprised and frightened at first, thanks to the ruthless manner in which his parents informed her about it, but then she saw a programme about trans identity on a private TV network where a physician discussed the matter in a clear and simple manner, and so she accepted that this was how the world was now. I think my grandma reacted in the same way, that if I'm happy with it and that's what I want, then it's all good. I began to cut back on my contacts with Mother; the final straw came when I called Grandma with Christmas wishes. So what if she was there and Grandma shared my wishes with all present—I didn't call *her* and that was an offence, an affront.

Just before Christmas, mere days before, the last hearing took place. The forensic expert wrote a lengthy but positive opinion, so we decided to go together on a one-day trip to Szczecin. I took time off from work until New Year—there was nothing going on, anyway. One cold December day—or rather, night—we went to the train station in Oliwa and hopped on the train. When we reached Szczecin, I was brought to a friend's tattoo parlour as a safety precaution, while Piotrek went to the courthouse. The hearing took literally minutes. The attorney for the parents said his clients were withdrawing all their other motions, and the judge delivered a positive sentence. No, the parents did not suddenly start loving him; it's just that, due to an unhealthy lifestyle—alcohol, cigarettes, years of work under constant stress, a fatty diet—his father had suffered a heart attack weeks before and they all seemed to prefer to focus on his recovery rather than throwing even more money at the case. The positive sentence was a major relief, but I couldn't enjoy it fully after all those nerves. Piotrek came for me, we went out to grab a bite, and then it was time to go back to Gdańsk. We only had to wait for the sentence to become legally binding to make sure the parents wouldn't appeal.

We spent the holidays alone. We made lots of dumplings and brought cake to our lonely neighbour. She told us about the owner of our apartment—or rather the lessee, for that's who he was—and about how our predecessors only spent a few months there, not years, and how he's been telling everyone he would change the windows since always. Those draughty windows really gave us grief since the bitter frost of winter was coming over us and we woke up in the morning cold even under the duvet and a blanket. The kitchen window would open when the wind blew, and if there's one thing you can say about the Tricity it's that it's always windy. In addition, the man came over in early January and started telling us he'd have to raise the rent. He was supposed to come over with the bills to settle the difference, but he always forgot to bring them, so we told him this was our last month there and we'd be moving out. Whether his attitude was about transphobia or greed, I can't say. I'd had enough of the daily tribulations with the No. 8 trams—when it didn't go off the rails, it just wouldn't show up. The search for a new apartment began. We decided we preferred to live in Gdynia because the local train was much more reliable than the Gdańsk trams.

We found a very cosy, sunny, and cheap apartment in the middle of Gdynia, on Warszawska Street. All of nineteen square metres. You walked straight into a hallway with a kitchenette, the living room was on the right, and the kitchen/hallway led to a tiny bathroom with a tub exactly to size, a washing machine, and a toilet. The community came through again, helping us move—this time, Nina and Tymek offered us their cars and driving licences. We squeezed into two cars and got going. Along the way, Tymek promised to set up a visit with an endocrinologist for Piotrek, because he needed one—that's the power of the community! Nina stayed with us so we could do a proper shopping run with her—we somehow managed to squeeze all the stuff in that tiny abode. We had perfect landlords: every month we sent them the money and photos of the metres, and every few months, they let us know if we were short based on the bills. In contrast to many of our previous landlords, they never came by, never said anything about our lifestyle. We often had rainbow pin-backs or flags on display and owners had tended to view them with scorn. Of course, we play-acted as a cis-heteronormative couple, as we had before, for safety and to avoid unnecessary unpleasantries, comments, or discrimination along the lines of "We don't serve your lot here!"

My mother came to the Tricity again and demanded that we meet on my birthday. I had made completely different plans for that day and didn't feel like meeting her. I got back home early and stayed with my beloved.

After 8pm, my mother started texting me that she was outside the office and that there was no one there, and she had a flower for me. She threatened to break a window to get inside; I was afraid she might flip a lid and actually do it. Luckily, there was a security guy there who took the flower from her and promised to hand it over the next day, which he did. Out of anxiety and a sense of responsibility, I invited her over for dinner the following day. She came late, as always, and kept grumbling. She began calling me and Piotrek names, coming up with stuff like "You could have found a NORMAL boyfriend when you're no longer a lesbian," and many other hurtful things. When she finally left, I promised myself I would never call her again. I cried afterwards, rattled, shaking; she stomped all over my already fragile psyche. These events—the hearings, trouble at work, attempts to get back in touch with my mother—really set my nerves on edge. I was increasingly anxious, suffering from panic attacks, often crying, and Iryd was the only one who could soothe me. At work, I locked myself in the toilet to calm down. For the moment, I tried to cope with the problem on my own, using herbal teas and psychological advice found on the Internet. Aside from Iryd, no one knew about my mental state—to the world, I played a part, pretending that everything was fine.

Piotrek scheduled a hysterectomy for early March. He opted for a laparoscopic procedure in Gdańsk. The reason we could afford such an expense—more than 7,000 zlotys—was because I earned enough at work. I was happy I could help him in this way. The doctor moved the operation to late March, just before Easter, for some personal reasons. The sentence became binding; the PESEL number changed, and he could change his first and last name now so that his parents wouldn't be able to track us. We chose the surname together because we were planning to marry. I cried all through the weekend before we went to the hospital—I couldn't hold back the tears and I didn't know why. Eventually, I took him there on Tuesday and went to work—you could see my office from the hospital window, you just needed to cross the street. After work, I went back and cried again. I stayed put until the nurses started to tactfully suggest that I should leave. I got back home and tried in vain to make myself eat anything, and then to find anything to do, but I was seized by a massive panic attack—I thought my heart would burst, that it would tear itself right out, that I would lose consciousness, that the world would fall apart—very hard to put in words. I was shaking all over, really rattling, and I couldn't do anything to stop it. Piotrek wasn't asleep but could do very little so far away from me; his texts barely made any difference, and neither did a bath or the vain attempt to go to sleep. The valerian didn't work, nor

the calming teas. Piotrek called Antek, asking if he could come by, but Antek was packing up for his morning plane to England. Still, he called me and we talked for a while, which helped me regain a little bit of composure. He offered to come by in about an hour, when he was ready, but I started feeling drowsy and told him I'd try sleeping and would keep in touch. In the morning, I thanked him for his readiness to help and rode to work half asleep. I struggled to focus on anything, waiting for Iryd to let me know the surgery was over. In the end, he called after 11am to give me a sign of life and slowly articulated a few sentences before trailing off. Then, he called again and said the nurses agreed to make an exception and let me visit that day. He also asked: "Buy me water, but it's gotta be Słowianka Beauty, because I want to be a beauty!" Way back, we laughed at this kind of gendering of mineral water—this one came in a rose-tinted bottle with the legend "for women" and a label proclaiming its various benefits. He must have remembered that. Słowianka Beauty was no longer on the market though, so I picked a bottle with a giraffe, which was enough to spark insurmountable joy. Generally speaking, the sight of someone coming off of anaesthesia is quite funny, so I laughed and cried at the same time. With him at my side, I finally got back some appetite, so I ate an entire box of hummus from Lidl with some crispbread, and then Piotrek secured "care" for me for the day—having me join Kasia and Olaf walking their dog. I spent quite a bit of time with them, then read a book, and fell asleep, tired. The next day after work, I stayed at the hospital until late again, ate some hummus, and counted down the hours until I could bring Piotrek back home. I took a day off for the Friday and the whole of next week. On Friday, I was at the hospital already in the morning. Once we were done with all the formalities, we hopped onto the local train home—there was a footbridge from the hospital to the nearest station and the walk from our station in Gdynia to home only took about five minutes. He got back in shape quickly—already the next day, we trotted together to get our Easter basket blessed, as we always do on Holy Saturday, and over the next few days, we walked to the beach to sit under the sun. These few days together helped me recover psychologically from the increasingly exhausting work and the foul airs at my workplace.

Piotrek's trial had ended, the time of imitating a "tru trans" was over, so he grew his hair long and repeatedly dyed it blue.[28] Wherever his outward

28 The notion of a "tru trans" (the author uses the English term in the original) is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the high threshold for recognising someone as a trans, mandating that one experience gender dysphoria, require medicalisation, present as a stereotypical exponent of their chosen gender, and undergo sex reassignment surgery in order to be

appearance went, people misgendered him more and more, taking him for a woman or calling him a faggot. One time, we were going to Antek's place at Cisowa Street and I was supposed to hop on his train at Gdynia Główna, but he called me from the train going from Gdańsk in a bit of a fright because—in broad daylight, on public transport, with people around—two guys began to talk loudly about how "it would be swell to knock the shit out of a faggot like this one." He moved to the other end of the train for safety and we travelled the rest of the way with our hearts in our mouths. There were increasing reports of beatings of gays (mostly), often also in daylight, occasionally in the evenings or at night, but who cares about the time! The very fact that these things happened more and more, that the perpetrators felt they could get away with it and were confident enough to turn words into actions, was troubling enough. On another occasion, we sat together on the beach, hugging, maybe even kissing a bit—as any normal couple would—but then, in the middle of the day, I heard some teenagers (late middle school to early high school, at most) shouting from the other end of the beach: "Come on, girl, what do you think you're doing, leave *that thing* alone!" It was addressed to me; there were only a handful of people there. I shouted back "Fuck off!" I'm usually more eloquent, but there's no point in arguing with scum. The kid didn't reply—I suppose he didn't expect that reaction. We stayed there for a bit, but then went walking somewhere else. There was just the two of us, and as many as ten of them; one could never tell what one-track minds like these could come up with after finding it appropriate to shout hateful comments across half the beach. I'll never understand why people care so much about someone else's life, usually the life of an unfamiliar passer-by, an anonymous user of public transport. I don't care what these people do with themselves—it's their life, it's their business. The hate, the homophobia, the transphobia continued to increase, and public perceptions changed. Was politics to blame? I don't think so. I believe these changes came from the ground up, so something must have started to shift within the society that allowed politicians like those to gain traction. Hate against other people—especially our kind of other people—is commonly accepted in Poland and it has been ever since I remember. Politics is a dirty and deceitful game I don't want to take part in—besides, politicians only care whether they can get on the gravy train; once they do, they stop caring and go on giving the people what they want—not the other way around. And those people

accepted as a "true" trans person. In Poland, this understanding of trans identity is widely applied by members of the medical and judicial community.

want to get rid of otherness. That group harbours massive reserves of hatred and intolerance. I've seen it day in, day out, on my way to work—near the Politechnika station, there's a tunnel where there's always some graffiti, and every month, I saw more and more neo-Nazi, anti-immigrant statements and symbols. If anything anti-fascist appeared, it was immediately painted over. Every year, Poland drops further and further down in the ILGA-Europe ranking; in terms of intolerance, it's always been in the top three. But it's society that's like that, and I really don't know why—it's something peculiarly Polish. The elections showcase the shifts in society—they're not the cause, but the effect. I often look on in amazement at the activities of the LGBT+ groups, admiring their persistence and patience in spite of the obstacles, destruction of offices, verbal and physical violence. More than once, I thought about becoming involved myself, but I was too afraid.

The Equality March 2018—my second—came up next. You could sense tension in the air even after it happened. There was much more police, one for every three participants on average. The officers came in full gear, with batons, gas bottles, shields, and other things, in cars with caged windows. Even the loudspeakers on the musical float began to skip a little. The atmosphere was much less festive, less joyful. There was fear in the air, you could sense people struggling against it to still enjoy themselves. In spite of everything, the people were smiling, waving flags—they were happy, but it was different from the year before. We set out from the vicinity of the Forum shopping centre and ended by the European Solidarity Centre. We passed one counter-demonstration along the way, and another waited at the end of the route—or maybe it was the same people and they just moved over? There were stalls of the City of Equality at the end of the route, but the participants dispersed as quickly as the last time, hid their flags, and washed the markings from their faces. Me and Piotrek passed through the stalls of a few of the organisations, but we also went away quickly to avoid any possible contact with the defenders of the True Polish Tradition. Luckily, there were still a few people from the march on the local train, but that must have been one of the last safe transports.

With the personal data changed, the ID card replaced, and the summer around the corner, we decided to get married! Toward the end of May, we went to the register office and here's how that went, more or less:

"Good morning, we'd like to get married."

"Good morning, and when would you like to do that?"

"What's the nearest available date?"

"June 28th, but that's Thursday..."

"Great, that suits us just fine!"

[A hint of surprise:] "Oh, fill in these forms, and after that, you have to pay a fee."

"Can we do that here?"

"Yes, the next door office. If you need a photographer, for instance, we have one that we've done business with... Would you like to have champagne, as well?"

"No, thank you."

A second later:

"Here you are, proof of payment."

"So, let me just write you the date and time."

"Thank you! Goodbye!"

The whole affair lasted about fifteen minutes, including standing in queue with the forms. In the meantime, another couple came in to complete some formalities relating to a church wedding—they were still there when we left. The lady at the office was very nice; I expect she rarely gets to see people who don't really care when they are going to marry. Generally speaking, I never had any issues with bureaucracy, other than the occasional unpleasant official so generous as to do his job, but those ones are equally bad for everyone. Once we were out of the register office, we went shopping for proper clothes. We went to the nearby used clothes store, where I found two long dresses—one blue with flowers for 10 zlotys, the other shaded from white through violet to blue for 12 zlotys. I couldn't decide which one to pick, so I took both—after all, I would wear both during the summer, anyway. Piotrek found some orange pants and then a flowery shirt in another thrift store. We wanted to have good fun, not taking it so seriously—I wasn't going to wear a meringue and suits weren't his style. Marriage was about making it easier for us to function together legally, about allowing us to share the same insurance, about me changing the name I had grown to hate, and about becoming a family in the eyes of the world. It wouldn't change anything between us—we had already spent more than five years together. After the wedding, we planned to celebrate on the beach and hold a competition for the best outfit. Antek was one best man and Tomek, Iryd's mate from Kraków, was the other. We created an event on Facebook, inviting our friends, and that was that as far as preparations went. I took the Thursday and Friday off from work without explaining why. In the end, I chose the shaded dress, resewed the straps to make them longer, and I was ready for the wedding. The day before, Piotrek baked strawberry pies and we bought a few bottles of Dalmatino—a brand of champagne for kids. Each of the

invitees was asked to bring something since our wedding was going to be pitch-in. The day before the wedding, Piotrek's friend from Kraków arrived, and the next day came Franka and Magda from the Warsaw office of Lambda, along with Aldona. Plenty of people from Kraków came; from the Tricity, there was Antek, Łucjan and Zuza, Kasia and Olaf, another Kasia and Igor, Kinga, Nina... All told, there were about thirty people. Nina was overjoyed and became our photographer; she even brought a badge labelled "PRESS" she had at home. When I picked up my camera, I decided to hand it to someone during the ceremony—it eventually went to Natalia, Tomek's girlfriend. Where's the need for a paid professional? When we invited Antek and asked him if he'd be our best man, he replied: "Alright, I'll just get a bathrobe." And that was no joke: when he joined us at the office, he put on... a Superman bathrobe! People burst out laughing. Other than that, we had a medieval knight and a girl with curl paper in her hair, as well as folks with a whole host of rainbow details and motifs. We sat on the chairs waiting to be let in. The marriage room at the Civil Register Office in Gdynia has only four chairs—for the young couple and their witnesses. The rest are welcome to stand behind them or sit on the floor, as did some of our guests. The lady official, amused though she was, kept things very professional. She was the most elegantly dressed person in that room; the register office offers live music played on a keyboard, but Mr. Music Man also wore a simple t-shirt and trousers and it looked like he hadn't combed his hair in years. The ceremony took ten, maybe fifteen minutes, and was generally boring. The lady read some formulas, then we repeated them after her, then we signed the papers, and that was it. We had no rings because we'd decided to pierce our ears instead and wear matching earrings. Afterwards, we were led to another room. Along the way, we passed another, fully normal ceremony and saw the people's jaws drop to the floor. We didn't know what we were supposed to do when we got there—it felt like an Escape Room—but it turned out this was the room where you could have your champagne; apparently people bring their own or drink the one provided by the office. We completed our evacuation, bumping into the remaining guests, who managed to miss the event because it was so short. We went to the beach, spread out our blankets and towels, and began to eat, drink Dalmatino and juices, talk, and enjoy ourselves. We bathed in the sea and played with Łucjan and Zuza's newly-bought rabbits. Their owners were also dressed to the

* "Queerowe wesele na plaży w... Gdyni!," Queer.pl, 4 July 2018, https://queer.pl/news/201512/queerowe-wesele-na-plazy-w-gdyni [author's note].

nines, but the train from Jastarnia came in late and they could only make it to the party. Our guests all said it was the best wedding party they ever attended! We stayed there almost until midnight—people left when they wanted to. Such a wonderful day! Queer.pl later ran a story about us.* I'm incredibly proud and happy to have lived that day the way I wanted to.

After the wedding, I had to let my employer know I changed my name, so I went straight to HR with a certificate and that was it. Whoever worked in a corporation knows how gossipy the ladies from HR can be, so the news quickly reached my team. And they made sure to let me know how disappointed they were that I never told them about my wedding because they would have sent a delegation from the company. But there was the small problem that I didn't want anybody from the company there. I wasn't close with these people—they were co-workers I could chat to over a sandwich about the weather or what I'd seen at the cinema. It was mine and Piotrek's party and we wanted us and our guests to feel free and easy—they were our good friends, bosom buddies. Besides, I can guarantee my workmates wouldn't understand the idea of our party: those who were already married had had classic Polish weddings, not hippie-queer beach parties. Shortly before my wedding, the TV actually ran the wedding celebrations of someone from the British royal family and talked about how beautiful it was, how it was a dream come true, how everyone wanted one like that. When I told them I preferred being on the beach with some friends, a co-worker replied, "Eh, you don't get it—when you do, you'll want it yourself." It's him that doesn't get that I know what I want better than he does. The team chief decided that, since I didn't tell anyone about it, I would now have to bring cake for the whole team. I brought a vegan cake and the chief brought something from a confectioner—and most of the vegan one was left for me because my co-workers wouldn't eat it. I'll never understand cis-heteronormies. At least they didn't ask for pictures; I don't know what would shock them more: the absence of standard wedding attire, Antek's best man in bathrobe act, or Łucjan in a binder, a BDSM leash, and a windmill cap. For them, it would amount to an offence against the sanctity of weddings. To me, it's our love that's sacred, not some official procedure.

The moment came when I could no longer go on, my anxieties getting the better of me. I needed specialist care but had no strength or energy to find it—I feared the doctors would discount the problem, as had been the case thus far. Piotrek found a female doctor with private practice in Gdynia who got glowing reviews in local leftist circles. I could afford such a substantial investment in my own welfare now, and Piotrek's massive

support compelled me to try her out. For the first time ever, I was heard out and not dismissed for making stuff up or being oversensitive. She prescribed appropriate treatment and pointed me to a psychotherapist who had an office two minutes on foot from my home. The day after the visit, I stayed home alone and started to give in to panic. I couldn't get through to Piotrek, which drove the panic further. I called Antek and told him I was having a panic attack. He started talking to me about the trip he was going on and we kept talking like that until I got a message from Iryd, about twenty minutes. It really helped me; I'm grateful for this kind of help and understanding. Afterwards, I dared to tell a few close friends about my problem, and each of them reassured me of their support. Many people within the community suffer from psychological problems—Polish realities leave their mark on us—so I eventually ran into a friend in the waiting room, and then more and more people I knew visited the same doctor. I slowly regained my footing thanks to medicine. The drugs I took also have a very desirable side effect—they switch off the menstrual cycle. It was a real relief: finally, I would no longer lose several days of my life every month, stop feeling disgusted with my own body, do away with the foul moods induced by periods. I think it triggers something akin to dysphoria in me, and now, by sheer coincidence, I was freed from it.

In August, we went on vacation to Czaplinek, of course in stealth mode, as usual—as a cis-heteronormative couple. Our time on the lake was very pleasant and nice; for the first time, I felt comfortable in a swimsuit, having bought a one-piece with a skirt, no cut-outs around the waistline or belly, no low neckline or bare bottom. We took two penises with us—Piotrek's packer, and another one for having sex if we happened to feel like it. That packer made for a perfect model: I did a lengthy photo-shoot while we were on a kayak trip and then back in our room. I should finally sort the pictures out and have them published. It all happened by sheer accident—my beloved is a total mess-maker and left it out in the open, and I thought it made a good shot. Then I decided we could have some fun with it, and I can confirm that I was correct. If cis men can take pictures of their penises and send them wherever they like—something I know thanks to many close friends who use dating apps—what's wrong about doing the same with one made from silicone? It's a different angle on the "dick pic": it may be a crude way of showing another person how eager you are to engage in sexual activity, but it can also be something charming, funny, and aesthetic. A kind of artistic performance—I like changing the meaning of things.

At the time, Łucjan and Zuza moved in near us in Gdynia, about fifteen minutes away on foot—a perfect reason to tighten our bonds! Our place was

on Łucjan's way home from work—a mere highschooler having to work for his own upkeep—so he often came over. We always gave him something to eat, and he eagerly washed the dishes for us since he likes doing that. We ordered herbs for our long-eared wards and drank tea together, as friends do. We helped him secure transport to Warsaw and he did his first injection at our place. Kraków's traditions coming to the Tricity: in Kraków, every trans does their first injection with someone and gifts that person with some funny hand-made card, usually adorned with drawings of penises or cut out into a phallic shape. Geographical proximity helped reinforce our relationship, which gave me a lot of joy since A. had taken offence about some bullshit, I can't even say what, and the support group took on a different shape after the summer break. The previous members stopped coming and instead other people appeared, turning it more into therapy than a social gathering, and it met less often because the leader wasn't as available. All that was left for me to do was to deepen existing relationships. Łucjan was one of the first shared friends I texted or met with on my own, which proved to me that I could maintain a relationship and that it wasn't my fault that things hadn't been working out for me before. Meanwhile, the sight of rabbits having perfectly good fun together at his and Zuza's place inspired me to adopt another earful after all; we'd still need just the one transporter. So we went to Uszakowo in Sopot and Lio stole my heart.

Autumn came, bringing with it dull bleakness. I went to therapy to see an incredibly nice young man; once, we even poked fun together at homophobes with their hateful shouts. Antek came back for the inauguration of another academic year, so he also visited us more often. He was another close friend to us next to Łucjan. Antek also had a very peculiar view of himself—as he once said, "Sex: Antek, sexuality: Antek," which really captures the way I operate. I have a sexuality of my own, a distinct identity that's unique and can't be lumped together in any old categories, can't be enclosed within any artificial theory. Should someone ask me about it now, I would paraphrase Antek: "Sex: Bun, sexuality: Bun." The statement came when we were reminiscing about our first kisses and sexual encounters, conversing about various social norms that we found uncomfortable. Piotrek and Antek set up the Food not Bombs initiative in Gdynia, which provides meals to the homeless. I noticed many people from the community involved themselves in various initiatives, not limiting themselves to activities in and around LGBT+ causes, and this included animal rights activism, helping the homeless and animals—generally aid to anyone who had no place in the public discourse. I also took part in that, designing a poster and cutting vegetables. Antek and Iryd were the

two pillars of the initiative: they obtained the vegetables, cooked them, and distributed them. In time, others joined in—Łucjan included. When you're discriminated against yourself, you feel moved to give others respite. We're all in the same boat that's called ostracism. In autumn, the March of Equals (Marsz Równych) took place in Gdynia, but I missed it due to a cold. I wanted to go, firstly because it was a demonstration for beautiful sentiments like universal equality and love, but also because Piotrek was among the speakers. Of course, there had to be a counter-demonstration with the typical watchwords; this time, they even brought loudspeakers to play some neo-Nazi music to drown out the speakers. Although Piotrek has been wearing a typical male haircut for a while and picked a black winter jacket for the event—a stereotypical image of a man in autumn in Poland—I was afraid for him.

Adopting Lio was the right move, and not only because of Pinen. She gave me a lot of strength and joy. Being a very sociable animal, she provided immeasurable help and support during my now-dissipating panic attacks and helped me deal with stress and anxiety. This was especially valuable to me in anticipation of job interviews, since I'd been on the lookout for a new employer for a while now. Piotrek and I decided to move to France because I knew the language, because we liked the French lifestyle, and because it's a tolerant society. I've been to France a few times and liked it—I didn't buy the right-wing crap about France falling apart, about its dissolution, about the preponderance of terrorism, and whatever else they came up with. These theories were laughed off by the French people we met via the Internet, who somehow didn't feel terrorised. We selected a few destination cities by taking walks in Google Street View, mostly in the west of the country, and set about sending the CV. Our planned date of departure was in February, right after qualifying exams for medical carers. Eventually, I found an opening from March onwards, so the time came for us to plan our move. We bought a big transporter on wheels and used the two 100-litre bags, the laptop bag, the brown bag, and several backpacks. Having got hold of a trolley, we now had to pick and choose as much stuff as we could get into all of this.

For Christmas Eve, we hosted all those who had nowhere else to go. Łucjan came, as did Agata from Food Not Bombs (not the one from school) and Kiri, who we'd met at the Living Library. It was another pitch-in party; the rabbits hopped and skipped under the table while we listened to carols, ate, and talked. This time, the LGBT+ ratio was much lower than two years before, but it's not like I'm trying to avoid other kinds of people. We gave Łucjan a truly masculine gift—a shaving set. We joked it was

because he was about to get mouldy, which is what I said when Iryd grew his first facial hair a while back. Days later came New Year's Eve, which we spent at our place again with Łucjan and Zuza. I don't think any of us is into clubbing, and the city party is always cold, full of boozed-up folk you'd rather avoid, and of late also has an exclusively disco polo soundtrack.[29]

During January, we prepared for our departure—booking overnight stays along the way, finding a place to live, visiting grandmothers before leaving. I wanted to see Grandma, who I hadn't seen since 2014, and I also wanted to see Grandpa, who had been struggling with cancer for a few months and whose prognosis looked fairly grim. I met them both and we talked, but we only stayed for a bit. They welcomed Piotrek warmly—as his grandma did me. The parents may not have turned out so good, but both grandmas are A-OK. When we returned, I turned in a request for release from work, which didn't surprise or affect anyone at all; perhaps no one is especially keen on working with someone who's coming back from a months-long psychiatric leave. At the time, I thought I didn't like the company, not the work, so the prospect of working in a different place wasn't scary. We managed to rent an apartment remotely; it looked good in pictures and was in a decent location. Really, the only things that remained was packing our bags and Piotrek passing his exam—and that was it. We made a few trial attempts and organised our stuff—whatever we could sell was sold and the rest went to our friends. Much of it went to Łucjan, who chose what he liked and passed the rest on to others. Our timing was perfect: the phobia against LGBT folk was ramping up at breakneck speed; LGBT-free zones began to pop up.[30] There's no use getting boiled in this Polish pot. We've had enough of homo- and transphobia, but the living and working conditions also became stifling. I may have earned well, but much of that went for the tiny apartment. Renting a place in good standard and normal size required much more than minimal pay, and you also needed to find a good lessee. As far as work was concerned, I had a permanent contract, but there was no way I could switch employers—everyone wanted to outsource. Piotrek had been drifting from one fixed-term contract to another for five years. The medical costs were out of this world. In addition, the ever-present air pollution also sometimes affected the Tricity, though perhaps more rarely than anywhere else in Poland. A wholesale degradation—in terms of society, health, labour, living standards, and community.

29 Disco polo—see n. 1 on p. 130.
30 LGBT-free zones—see n. 12 on p. 184.

Toulouse

Finally, the long-awaited day of departure came. Our train to Berlin left from Gdynia just after 7am, so—mindful of all the bags—we decided to start getting ready after 6am. Łucjan came, as did Kiri, and we brought all the stuff out to him slowly while making sure nothing got left behind. We were out in good order when the owner showed up to collect the keys. I carried a backpack and pulled the rabbits with a bag of their things on top of the trolley. Everyone else was pulling a suitcase or the trolley with the bags; Piotrek also carried two backpacks. All of our earthly belongings—aside from a small box of documents and books we had mailed a few days before—squeezed into these few bags. Reaching the platform, we found the train had been parked a bit earlier, so I got on with the rabbits to hold the seats. Our suitcases landed in the luggage rack. It was Monday, so many of the passengers travelled with small suitcases or backpacks and we had no problem finding room for our things. It finally arrived; I had passed by that train so many times on the way to work, telling myself, "Just wait a little more and we'll go." The train moved and we waved to our helpers. I shared the news with Daniel and Agata—we were on our way. A few hours later, we reached Berlin and were picked up by Sav. He and a friend of his helped us get off the train and led us to their place; they had agreed to be our layover. Sav and Agares themselves had travelled by the same train about a year and a half before, so they knew well the pain of moving. Sadly, one of the suitcases didn't survive the trip and broke; luckily, nothing was lost and we quickly replaced it. We spent a wonderful afternoon with the guys, us telling them about our lives and them telling us about theirs in Berlin. The next day after 11am, we had a train from Berlin to Frankfurt am Main to catch. Our invaluable friends helped us get on the train, but from then on out, we had to make do by ourselves. In Frankfurt, we would have an hour to make it across the entire station—I deliberately picked connections that gave us a bit of a cushion. We did make it to the platform—Germans give you the platform number when you buy the ticket—and awaited our train to Paris. That's where we faced the first hurdle: French trains are double-deckers and our seats were in the upper deck. Other passengers helped us put our suitcases on the racks, I placed the rabbits under my legs, and Piotrek put the backpacks under his and on the shelf above. We left. The ride was smooth until Strasbourg, when there came the announcement that due to technical issues with the train we'd have to change into another that was going to arrive on the other side of the platform. Bienvenue en France! Somehow, we made it out of the old one with all our belongings and picked seats in the lower deck of the new

one so as not to have to move all that weight again once we reached our next stop. I can confirm that the TGV is fast—you can feel the speed, it's almost like flying. We reached Paris with a delay; the taxi I ordered turned out to be a minicar and couldn't take us in, but a luggage taxi soon arrived and we reached Campanile near the Montparnasse station—from where we were to depart the next morning—without a hitch. The night was short, what with our alarm being set for 5am. The last leg of our journey would begin at 6:50am, and by 11am we were supposed to be in Toulouse. There were some 700 metres from the hotel to the station, so we thought we'd make it on foot. It was uphill, but we reached the station ahead of time with a few breathers, only to be surprised by a French peculiarity: there, platform numbers only show up about 15 minutes ahead of departure. We waited for ours to pop up until it did: platform 23. Our seats were on the upper deck again, but another passenger helped us out. He asked us where we were from, and when we said we were from Poland and leaving for good, he smiled, gave us a proper welcome and told us we were doing the right thing. So there we were, happily settled in our seats waiting for the train to depart—but it stayed put. "Meh, probably another delay." Indeed, soon came an announcement to that effect. And then another. And then about a small technical difficulty. And then, finally, they said the train would not depart and we had to transfer to the one on platform 2. There was a serious commotion on our train—the same passenger helped us get out with our stuff and we ran across the whole station. The thing was that this train was going to Bordeaux and was now being extended to Toulouse, so it was already pretty packed. We decided to seat ourselves on the stairs by the exit. Finally, the train moved and we kept our fingers crossed it would continue to do so until the final destination. The lady from the estate agency who was to hand us the keys wasn't surprised that the train would be arriving an hour late. The staff on the train worried whether we were comfortable, but we told them we didn't feel like carrying all the stuff across two cars, to the seats they found for us. Luckily, Bordeaux was the next stop, and most people got off there, so we moved our luggage to the racks and got into the seats. I was overjoyed—my dreams of leaving Poland, of moving to France, were coming true. I gazed at the landscapes, so different from the ones in Poland. In spite of the mix-up with the trains, no one was angry, strangers helped one another out, the staff made sure everyone was comfortable, even going a few cars into the train to find seats for the passengers. Finally, we reached Toulouse. We were picked up by a guy we met on a queer Internet forum. He helped us get off the train and then led us out of the station and hailed us a cab.

I thought we would go by bus, but Piotrek said I was being crazy. We got into the cab and were soon there. I spent an hour inside the apartment with the agency lady, preparing a report about its condition.

It's the biggest apartment I ever lived in: 55 square metres, with a bedroom, living room, bathroom with a tub, and a massive kitchen. And two large balconies, to boot. Aside from walk-in closets, kitchen cabinets, a fridge, a washing machine, kitchen counters with two barstools, a small TV stand, and a table, it had no furniture, as French apartments tend to do, so that tenants can organise their space as they see fit. I liked that because it meant I could finally go beyond merely decorating the apartment and actually choose my own furnishings. I could finally feel at home, express myself—live among colours. I hung colourful drapes—each in a different shade—chose a bed, and then we bought a mattress. Those were the major priorities. With time, I got some cacti, chairs for the table, and we found a table for the balcony for free, which I then painted blue. I hung crochet butterflies and went on to add further crochet details to the apartment. I also painted the wall in the living room pistachio. The apartment has no defined style—it has a style of my own. There's a shiny IKEA cabinet and some rattan chairs. Soon, we'll add a sofa upholstered with a parrot ornament; the previous one, the cheapest we could get, didn't survive trial by rabbit teeth. I have a rabbit-shaped lamp and a postcard with a unicorn from the Equality Parade. Renting space is a very common thing in France. It's not a temporary solution before you can get credit the way it works in Poland—if I'm renting it, it's mine. It's even stated in the contract: I can use it and decorate it as I please; I can't sublet it, but I can admit as many guests as I want; I can't demolish walls, but I can repaint them. This is my safe haven. I no longer fear that the owner can come at any hour to see how I live or tell me to scram. I never experienced the latter, but I heard first-hand accounts of the kind. As a tenant, I don't feel reduced, like a child in a room that the parents can always walk into, dismantling any privacy or intimacy. Lessee visits in Poland repeatedly prompted us to not only clean house, but also hide certain elements that could elicit a negative response, such as a flag or even a colourful object. Before we moved away, it often happened that the owner brought in prospective tenants as soon as he could to show them the apartment before we left it; he may have given us the heads-up, but he walked in like it was his place, as if we weren't there. Once, we got a talking-to for an unwashed pot in the sink—the fact that they came as we were having dinner somehow didn't register. Here, pictures of the apartment are taken when it's already empty. Only me and Piotrek have the keys to the place. This guarantees

privacy. For the first time, I feel that the apartment I live in is my home, even though my home was always wherever Iryd and the rabbits were. Recently I found a unicorn doormat with a rainbow-coloured "Welcome" sign and hung a rainbow flag as a curtain, and yet our neighbours still say "Bonjour!" to me. We may not have the closest of relationships, but we always welcome one another, smile to one another, and when needed, I pick up packages for them. No one cares about my personal life, no one makes any comments.

Soon after arriving, Iryd and I went for a meeting of the local LGBT+ group. It was a bit problematic since he didn't know the language, but the meeting was nice. The groups here meet in a civic space called Espace Diversités Laïcité (Space of Diversities and Secularity) which has a rainbow flag painted outside and plenty of colourful motifs. No one raises a hand against it, and yet it sits right in the middle of the city. The meetings are more of the social kind, or at least that's how the group we joined operates. It's not a therapy group. When you join, you can grab a bite, have a drink, talk with others, play a game. You can also stock up on condoms, which are provided free of charge thanks to financing from the Ministry of Health. After the meeting, we went to the local clubs—G-Bar or Bear's. There, you can have beer, juice, eat some food—once we got them to make us vegan sandwiches—or dance. These clubs are also in the centre of the city, not hidden from view the way the Glam nightclub is in Warsaw. I enjoyed myself more while there because they don't have this nightclub aura. When I'm in a place like this, I'd rather talk over a juice. The other kind of nightclub is also to be found, but I never went there—it's not my cup of tea. In Poland, I was used to thinking LGBT+ people stuck together not only for the mutual understanding and support, but also because of social exclusion. Here, it's just another social group. People don't find it as hard for their own families, or fellow pupils or students, or fellow workers to accept them. This has caused me to struggle to form more durable relationships, but I'm never short on topics for conversation. Yet they do make gay-dramas here—films about gays—and lesbo-dramas—films about lesbians—of which the French film industry produces much more than the Polish does. I suppose these are universal categories. Every winter, there's an LGBT+ film festival; last year we reached Toulouse just as it ended, and this time I didn't go for fear of catching the coronavirus, though I had a shortlist of films I wanted to see. Well, I'll probably get another chance sometime. The whole hullabaloo over the virus prevented me from seeing anyone here, but I hope it will end eventually. I have some friends here, such as Edgar, who I often meet, and we had a couple

of guests at our place and a few picnics in the park. The community isn't as tightly-bound here as it is in Poland.

The difference between the two societies is visible every day. Piotrek is never misgendered, even though he's been wearing his hair long—long enough to sport a bit of a ponytail. No one shouts "Lesbos!" or "Fags!" behind our backs, there's no contemptuous murmurs or grumblings. I wear colourful clothes, but the most I get from other people is the occasional comment that I look nice—no sexist crap. There is, of course, the fact that homophobia, transphobia, sexism, and other forms of discrimination are punishable by law. I stopped shaving my legs—the hair is natural and doesn't bother me—and walk the streets like that without a care. In Poland, complete strangers would loudly comment "Eww, a girl with unshaven legs!" or "Oi lady, you forgot to shave your legs!" Here, I see folks that are as queer as the ones I met at queer parties in squats, and they walk the streets like anyone else, without being harassed or catcalled. Łucjan, who visited us twice in the space of a year and a half, had the same observations. He was shocked to see a person with a pretty androgynous appearance, dressed in tight pants, a loose-fitting coloured blouse, with earrings and dyed hair, just walking without anyone noticing and without showing any fear. Łucjan also experienced no misgendering here, even though it happened to him daily in Poland. When I say I'm from Poland, I hear "Is it true about those LGBT-free zones? Why is no one protesting about that?" "Oh, Poland—that's where they have problems with gays! I can't see why," and this often comes from people from outside of the community, like a farmer selling vegetables in the market or a doctor. I never faced any LGBT-phobia from a physician, and neither did Piotrek. They don't try to blame everything on transsexuality, don't claim they wouldn't treat people with *those* problems. I'm not afraid to tell a doctor I share my sexual life with a trans—I was while in Poland, always stressed out before a visit, and often got in return a sigh or something along the lines of "You're not pregnant, so why did you come here?"

One major event here every year (even according to Wikipedia) is the Equality Parade, or Marche des Fiertés—literally, the March of the Proud. The people here are indeed proud of being a part of the community. I also began to feel this pride in place of the constant fear. Prior to the march, there's a fair where you can stock up on flags or accessories. There are also stands of the organisations that open the march with some speeches. The event basically lasts the whole day; the entire city is awash with colours, people confidently wearing rainbow-coloured clothes and carrying rainbow flags. There's plenty of music coming from the floats and

the people wave their flags and dance. A moving feast. The police is there really only to block the roads—the march passes along the main thoroughfares—and there are less of them then in Poland. This was the first time I saw marchers dressed up like carnival dancers in Rio, lots of feathers and skimpy underwear, or wearing leather BDSM masks, though I'm yet to spot the guys from the famous counter-protester placard I saw in Poland. Oh right—there's also no counter-protesters! *At all*. If you don't want to take part, you don't come. Being at the march made me feel great—I felt happy, free, and proud that I was there. I also felt safe. When the march ended—when the floats reached their destination—the party continued with dancing and singing. After the march, people went to the riverbanks, to nightclubs, they went for a walk, but the march didn't disappear the way it did in Poland. It just gently spread across the town. I wanted to take part in subsequent editions of the march, but the virus meant it was called off in 2020. Just my luck—maybe next year!

There may have been no march this year, but there were the deplorable events in Poland: the repression of LGBT+ communities, and particularly the arrest of Margot.[31] I took a piece of cardboard and wrote *Toulouse solidaire avec LGBT+ en Pologne* (Toulouse in solidarity with LGBT+ in Poland), Piotrek bought a rainbow flag, and we went into the town and took a few pictures. Along the way, we met a gay man who joined us. A couple of folks wished us a nice day or asked if this was a protest, what we were marching for. We explained the causes of our actions. The current situation in Poland fills me with foreboding and I'm immensely happy not to be there, but I'm also afraid for my friends. I know activism gives you strength, but I do fear a little bit—though less so for being here. Truth be told, I'm more of an educator than an activist. I try to talk about things—the more people know, the better. Maybe this will produce enough social pressure to force some changes to the Polish mentality, though in recent years the only change was towards radicalism, towards conservatism. Politicians are as changeable as a weathercock: they do that which yields the most profit. The only hope is that the people change—but so far, I'm only seeing a mass exodus of my own friends from the community. In the past two or three years, several of them went away, and recent events prompted others to follow suit. A few are planning to go once they deal with some other issues. It's sad that you can't just live anywhere. I'm an optimist and I keep a cheery outlook on my life—my life in France—but though I hold out hope that the situation in Poland changes for the better, I can't help

31 For more on Margot, see the Introduction, p. XVII—VIII.

being pessimistic about it. I always wanted to leave Poland, there was plenty of stuff that felt stifling to me there, but not everyone shares my perspective, and everyone deserves a dignified and safe existence.

At this moment, I'm unemployed because my employer decided against signing me up on a permanent basis after the trial period. Pretty much ever since I arrived in France, I've thought about changing careers, going back to university—this time, to study something that interests me (I initially thought about something aligned with my work). Life can play tricks on you, but luckily, the fact that I had worked in France and in Poland gave me the right to unemployment benefits. So I could still cover the necessities even after losing my job, without limiting expenses, and still had something left at the end of the month. Perhaps it wasn't the kind of money that pays for a holiday outing, but at least I didn't have to plan in advance when to buy new shoes, which did happen in Kraków. I could safely stake out a new path. Initially, I thought about some of the courses on offer for the unemployed, but an internship left me doubtful about the idea of becoming a career counsellor, and a rejection letter from a training centre provided as clear an indicator as I could wish for. That left me feeling a bit down, but then came the global freeze caused by the coronavirus, which allowed me to rethink a few things and decide to become a student again. Piotrek had just found work as a medical carer, so we'll have something to cover our expenses, and I'll be able to fulfil my dream. Perhaps next year we might go on holiday?

Future

I plan to study literature and art, and I'd like to begin in 2021. Registration is already closed for this year—also, the mess resulting from the virus justifies some reluctance. I'd like to become a writer of books; for years, my brain has been humming with ideas, but I never had the time or the privacy required to make them happen. I love to read and I enjoy thinking up scenarios, coming up with stories, often using my own experiences or what I heard from others. I would certainly write about queerdom, but not exclusively so. I would also like to further develop my artistic skills—who knows, maybe the world might eventually see them in full bloom? I mostly draw and paint landscapes, occasionally dabbling in abstractions. My works are rich in colour because that's how I am. Art has always given me a sense of freedom, a means of self-expression, for expressing my thoughts and feelings. Most of all, I want to be happy, I want to love, to spend as much time as I can with Iryd, to see the beauty of the world around me—the region I live in has so many amazing places worthy of a visit! I want

to look after what I value most: our love that is my pride, my strength for living. I never thought I'd meet someone like that, that I would have the privilege of sharing a life with someone so wonderful and warm. I always saw myself as a lonely and sad figure. That which is most wonderful comes of its own accord, unexpected. As far as the future is concerned, I have no specific expectations. Maybe I'll become a librarian or a teacher? I've had plenty of plans, both of my own and forced upon me by others, and none of them ever came to fruition. So far, I'm liking Toulouse and I might stay here longer; perhaps we'll move somewhere else in France—time will tell. I will certainly not return to Poland. Why would I fight for survival every single day when I can live peacefully here, without fear of losing my home, losing my job, without fear of verbal or physical assault induced by the ever-present hatred, the revived fascism. I feel free and safe here. I'm in constant contact with Agata, Daniel, Łucjan, and my grandma, and that's all I need. I sometimes wish I could meet them face-to-face, but you can't have everything. Perhaps they might visit me sometime, or maybe we'll just happen to meet? My grandma is also appalled by the direction of the social changes in Poland, the growing and all-encompassing hate, and though she misses me—and I also wish I could share dinner with her or come by with a cake—she's happy that I am happy and safe. Maybe she'll visit once the pandemic is over. I certainly don't want to have kids, and even less to be pregnant. I'll stick to the rabbits, who are fully-fledged members of my family in my eyes. I'd never want to be without a long-eared creature I could give a warm and safe home to. Who I am isn't just LGBT+—it's also veganism, artistic activities, literary interests, and a lot more. I would like to develop in my entirety, develop in my various aspects without ever letting any lie fallow, as had happened with my artistic passions while I was in high school. I just want to be myself.

15

ALEKSANDRA PUCIŁOWSKA [I was born in the late 1980s. I come from Stargard, Poland, but I've been living in Berlin for many years now, where I work at a start-up. Privately, a cat lady and lover of the written word. Author of *Mów mi Charlie* [*Call Me Charlie*], a book centred around lesbian love]

That was my first Pride in Poland. We came in by train from Berlin and hiked all the way to the border on the Oder River.

I had mixed feelings while crossing the bridge that links Frankfurt and Słubice. On the Polish side we were greeted by police officers armed to the teeth. A moment later we were standing in front of a group of people with a banner saying "Leave our children alone." The police cordoned them off and pointed us in another direction. So we turned left and mingled with the colourful crowd that was heading towards Heroes Square (Plac Bohaterów), where the march was about to start. A moment later, on my left, I saw a man with a banner in his right hand. He was flying the flag of Poland. In his other hand he held a leash, attached to his pitbull. He walked alongside us, with the dog, shouting, swearing and spitting in our direction. The police approached him and pushed him a little further away, but I saw him again several times during the march.

A crowd of people appeared before our eyes in Bohaterów Square. There were many more of us than we had anticipated. The organisers seemed surprised too—they had registered a demonstration for 150 people, but almost a thousand turned up. We were standing around the fountain, and a voice through a megaphone requested us to follow all instructions, issued reminders about masks and distances between participants, called on us to avoid being provoked and not to trample the greenery. You never know what reason might be enough to disband a protest. The voice mentioned how to recognise volunteers who could help if the situation escalated. Behind another police cordon, I spotted the famous homophobe van.[1] My sister walked towards it to take photos. I looked at her slightly concerned, afraid of how people would react. They stared at the rainbow flag sticking out of her backpack, and I nervously watched the situation unfold, ready to rush to her aid at any moment.

We set off in two groups, trying to maintain the legal distance of 1.5 metres between participants. Walking towards the German border, police officers—armed with batons, handcuffs, and pistols, and wearing combat

1 Homophobus—see n. 9 on p. 27.

waistcoats—accompanied us all the way. They were there to protect us, yet I felt a mild sense of anxiety when I saw their gaze directed towards us. Some were dressed in civilian clothes, with cameras in their hands, recording the entire march; there were also police drones flying over our heads.

We could see a crowd of onlookers behind them, many waving at us in a friendly manner, and we greeted them with vigorous applause, though we were separated by black police uniforms. We yelled "Come with us!." Whole families could be seen on the balconies following the route of our march. There were greetings, smiles.

Suddenly, the cheerful music blaring from our speakers was disrupted by a different sound. I looked to my left, where the police cordon seemed noticeably denser, and spotted the same group we had passed an hour earlier. They recited the Our Father through a megaphone; their banners carried slogans such as "Gender-Free Schools in Poland," "Poland for the Civilisation of Life," "Yes to Fidelity, Yes to Chastity."[2]

I felt odd. My sister and I walked closer. I wanted to look them in the eye, to make contact—the usual, interpersonal kind. I wondered what they were protesting against. Against love? If they looked into my eyes, would they really see a threat to their family, to their children? Would I be able to convince them otherwise?.... I failed to get close enough—the police weren't loosening their ranks. A gentleman standing on the balcony above the praying people gave us a friendly wave, so I smiled at him. A moment later we moved on.

Crossing the bridge to the German side, everyone proudly raised their colourful flags higher, letting them flutter in the wind. It was a beautiful, somewhat magical sight. A sense of togetherness, of solidarity and mutual support, of safety and understanding. And above all, a breath of freedom—as if the gentle breeze blowing from the western bank of the Oder portended that we were about to find ourselves in a completely different world...

Beyond the bridge, on the German side, we were actually greeted by a different reality. German police, sans combat uniforms, were blocking traffic to allow us to cross in peace. One of the policemen was helping an elderly lady across the street. The heavily armed Polish policemen who

2 In right-wing discourse in Poland, "gender" has become identified with LGBT+ causes to the extent that the word is used as a reference to them (as in *ideologia gender*, gender ideology—a term that only makes sense if gender is assumed to be a made-up idea completely inconsistent with "normal" human sexuality). *Cywilizacja życia* (lit. civilisation of life) is a term coined by Pope John Paul II, referring to the adherence to "traditional" family values and belief in the sanctity of human life; by contrast, proponents of access to abortion, contraception, and of the right to define one's own sexual and gender identity are said to represent the "civilisation of death" (*cywilizacja śmierci*).

had accompanied us at every step suddenly disappeared. Random people we passed smiled at us, and some joined in spontaneously. Making a connection was no longer a problem; we could talk to them, look into each other's eyes. It turned out that nobody wanted to hurt anyone.

A few moments later, after the emotional speeches, a spontaneous party broke out at one of the stops. Drag queens performed a beautiful dance, and other participants soon joined in. The music was loud, everyone was singing, jumping with joy, and the colourful flags were flying over our heads, attracting more and more passers-by. The police stood somewhere off to the side, and no one even noticed their presence.

A couple of minutes later, we set off towards the finish line of the march, for a concert by the Brokatowe Damy (Glitter Ladies). The dancing crowd followed the direction set by the organisers. One of the ladies walking in front turned to me and handed me a silicone bracelet. I picked it up and read "Liebe tut der Seele gut. Evangelische Kirche Berlin" (Love does the soul good. Evangelical Church Berlin). I smiled inside—and even though I don't identify with any religion, I put the bracelet on my wrist and thanked the lady.

A short moment later I heard a random woman shouting through a mic, which had been taken from one of the organisers: "People, convert, you have to convert!." Someone thanked her sarcastically for the words, and we started applauding. I wondered if I should find her and give her the bracelet. She clearly needed it more than I did.

At the end of the demonstration there were speeches, and the concert. One of the Glitter Ladies' lyrics went like this: *You ask how we're doing? More or less the same as you*. And I regretted that the people I'd seen praying earlier, the gentleman with the Polish flag and the pitbull on a leash and the lady who wanted to convert us, were not there among us. I wished I could have danced with them, laughed and chatted. Shown them that they didn't have to be afraid. I wanted them to see that we were just like them. That no one wanted to hurt them, no one threatened them or their children.

But they were not there. Perhaps they were still praying. Perhaps to the Virgin Mary, who (as the banner on one of the notorious vans proclaimed) is supposed to "protect Poland against the rainbow plague."

As I was returning to Berlin by train, it started to rain. A few minutes later a rainbow appeared in the sky. I firmly believed that it was also perfectly visible in Słubice. I felt weird... On the one hand, I was happy to be back in Berlin—in a world where I don't have to be afraid when I hold my girlfriend's hand. In a reality where, whether in private, at work, or

in a public space, I can be myself. In a country where I don't have to hear that I'm a threat to anyone, that I'm destroying the homeland, that I'm a plague. On the other hand, as I looked at the border getting farther and farther away, I thought: what if my place was right there? Shouldn't I go back and fight to make sure that in my own country citizens aren't divided into categories, the good and the bad?

Do I have the right to enjoy this freedom that I have in Berlin, knowing that an hour away by train the president of my country dehumanises a part of the population, and that all the tragedies caused by growing homophobia seem to move only a handful of people?...

This dissonance between Poland and Germany that I saw in such a condensed form at the Frankfurt-Słubice Pride will certainly not allow me to sleep soundly for many more nights. All I know for now is that I want to cuddle up to my girlfriend tonight and feel her warmth. I'm so happy that she is safe—that she is in Berlin with me.

I'll probably return to Poland more than once. And I'm not going to hide: if they want to spit on me, let them spit. If they beat me up, so be it. If I'm told that I'm a freak of nature again, be that as it may.

I'll do my best to be able, in time, to cross the Frankfurt Bridge again without worrying about what will happen to me on the other side of the Oder. This road is probably still a very long one. But I believe it will become a reality. One day I will walk it with my girlfriend and we won't let go of each other's hands when approaching the border posts with the sign of the Polish Eagle. We will do it without fear or anxiety. I know this for sure—Poland is a beautiful country full of wonderful people. These dark years will pass. They have to.

Poland is yet to shine in all the colours of the rainbow. I saw it clearly in the sky on the train, on my way back to Berlin.

16

TOMASZ JANOTA [Born 1993 in Sosnowiec, transgender and pansexual person, lives in Zabrze.]

History of a transgender person

My name is Tomasz, I'm almost 27 years old and I'm transgender.

I've been through a court-ordered personal data change, as well as two operations.

Here is a part of my story.

I was adopted at the age of two. My parents loved and cared for me, and told me about it so skilfully that I don't even remember when exactly it happened—I just accepted it naturally.

When I was a child, gender didn't matter to me; girls had long hair and boys had short hair, and that was that.

Back then my mother was already imposing some limits: I couldn't wear what I liked. I didn't want blouses with necklines like my friends, or skirts, I just wanted to wear ordinary clothes—the simplest ones, with no frills, no fancy cuts. Meanwhile, mum liked the way we dressed to emphasise the fact that the family was successful—dad was working in the Netherlands.

I remember my mum buying me denim trousers and a jacket with loads of sequins. Of course, I had no say in the matter. All my friends envied me, which doubled my embarrassment. I ripped the sequins off the trousers and said they had come off. I got a hard spanking for the missing sequins, which hurt so much I didn't dare touch the jacket.

I was the life of the party. People wanted to hang out with me and I made no secret of the fact that it brought me a lot of joy. It was the best time of my life—I didn't worry about anything then, and I don't mean worrying about bills or things like that. That's when I felt free, really free. The boys and I practised parkour and none of them saw me as a potential girlfriend, just as a good mate.

Two people who trained in capoeira were part of our social circle as well. They invited me to a practice and that's when I fell in love with the sport. I took up training and I told my mother that "it's kind of like dancing." Later on, the town square where we trained was demolished, which felt symbolic of the way times were changing: my social circle changed too. Puberty became more troublesome.

Then came the time when everything went downhill—middle school. When I was in second grade, my father died. His death took its toll on me. I was even more depressed, but that was just the tip of the iceberg.

Everything started to bring me down: the situation at home, the arguments with my mother, my appearance (my ever-growing hips and breasts). Another obstacle, a stone thrown by my mother, was the ban on capoeira (she heard from someone what it was and decided it wasn't for me, but for the boys). That broke my heart. That was the first time I cried so much over anything. I tried to keep living somehow, to escape into a better, non-existent world located in the pages of my notebooks. For a while this imaginary world helped, but then the sadness returned. I didn't want to live. Everything was crumbling, falling grades at school, people's taunts, my mother's increasing use of physical force, my girlfriends preferring to spend time together rather than with me—and I already started having a thing for one of them. I had no dreams and no purpose in life.

At the end of my second year of middle school, a friend from the computer club introduced me to his friend, and we became a couple. He was my last boyfriend. We were together for almost three years. We kept splitting up and getting back together. Sometimes he tried to get me to wear women's clothes by buying me necklaces and other stuff. As time went on, he realised that he wouldn't succeed.

Even though we were together so long, nothing happened between us. He tried—but I was unable to. He was patient, and it began to dawn on me that I was only hurting him and wasting his time. A few times I let him touch my breasts. Once, when we were lying in a meadow, I tried, in a playful way, to take control. I took off his t-shirt and kissed his chest, but he laughed. He said he felt like a fag. My most intimate memory is of him fondling my breasts when I was lying at his house. Back then, I couldn't look at my body. I couldn't even look at it when I was having a shower.

I chose to be alone. My circle of friends began to narrow down and was limited to three people, only girls. Going out no longer gave me any joy or satisfaction. Before, I didn't see any difference between me and other boys. Yes, I knew they were biologically different, but that wasn't an obstacle—I simply identified with them. I didn't tell everyone "Listen, I'm a boy"—I didn't even call myself that at the time. I just felt like one.

I used to take it as a compliment when my mother, family or friends would say "You look like a guy." When my breasts began to develop, however, I started to feel insecure. As time went on, I stopped being the life of the party, turned into a mere "accessory." I started to compose sad poems in neutral gender, because it suited me better that way.

I can't remember when exactly I typed in the phrase "I feel like a boy" online, or by what route I ended up on a transsexual (now transgender) website. I felt reassured at the time—I wasn't alone, I wasn't crazy. When I saw the costs, I was horrified and realised it wouldn't work (those were the days when 20 zlotys was a fortune to me—my mother hardly gave me any pocket money after my father died). I tried to forget about it, forget that site, the problem, and keep going. Living as a girl. I tried to put on make-up, but not pink, only black. For a short period I consciously wore earrings.

"Be a woman!" I tried. I really did. Nobody realised how much I was struggling with myself. They'd say, "Well, you've finally got your eyes done," and inside I was tearing up: "It's not me!" I got a skirt from my aunt, but even then I couldn't put it on. We spent days and days arguing over it. I only wore it once, when I gave in to a whole lot of blackmail from my mum. When I went out wearing it I felt like a loser, and my look made my friends, who were not used to seeing me like that, laugh. On the other hand, I was happy because my mother—who was always peeking through the window at me—saw the laughter and let it go.

I finally gave up. I started dressing in black and wearing sweatshirts that were too long. That's when I told my (ex)boyfriend about it, and that's what caused the break-up—he claimed it was a mental illness. I wasn't interested in relationships anymore. I was bland. And I hated myself: I was self-mutilating, writing sad poems, having suicidal thoughts. After a friend told the school counsellor that she had read a suicide note in one of my poetry notebooks, the school intervened. They sent me and my mum to a psychologist and then I had meetings with a school counsellor every few days. The headmaster also talked to me and suggested different activities—such as a computer club or art club. They tried to take care of my mental health.

I failed the second year of middle school. I repeated it. It got worse. I was constantly depressed. I tried to wear unisex stuff (although I didn't even know the term at the time)—my mother still tried to interfere with my choice of clothes.

I was 18 when I chose a name for myself—Tomek. The summer before my 19th birthday I met a girl who knew about me from the start—and it felt great. I began to raise money to see a sexologist and have hormone and liver tests. The sexologist interviewed me, took my test results and prescribed me hormones.

I was 19 years old when I came out to mum. I hadn't planned it in advance. I'd just returned from having my first hormone injection at the clinic. A special day for a person like me. The first step on a long road,

a milestone! I left my bag and went out to walk the dog. When I returned, my mum was standing in the hallway, furious, holding the hormones she'd taken out of the bag. My hands began to tremble, and my legs went soft as if a car was about to hit me. I told her the truth, I opened up, I knew it was the only thing I could do. She didn't even want to listen properly. She kept shouting at me. I showed her an online forum for trans people, it featured a "parents section" where everything was explained. She said that I was "not like that" and that the others were "fucked up." That "I can be a lesbian if I have to, but I should put all the rest out of my mind." She said it was because of the computer, that I had read it online, or that someone had made me believe it, and that all doctors were evil (I suggested she go with me to the sexologist).

I cried all through the night. My first shot, my first day being myself. I felt like Icarus. Such an abrupt end. She took my hormones, dumped them somewhere, completely cut me off from money. She started to control me every step of the way, using mental and physical violence.

Two years later I ran away from home to stay with someone I barely knew and had never met. I left my mum a letter telling her I wasn't a lesbian because I wasn't a girl, that I was sick of her throwing away my "not feminine enough" clothes and humiliating me. I was 21 and she threatened me with the police, a psychiatric hospital and drug tests (which I never took). After a week, I went back because mum wrote back that she'd "somehow put up with it."

The extended family also found out then. They suddenly changed their minds. They used to complain: "You dress like a boy," and now they suddenly seemed to have forgotten all about it. I had to be strong in front of all of them. Even when my mother, in their presence, suddenly rolled up my blouse to show what "filth" I was wearing—she meant my first binder. I also started using the neutral gender form to avoid speaking in the feminine.

Later I went to work in the Netherlands and there were funny situations—funny for others, that is.

As I still had female personal data, I worked alongside the girls in slightly lighter jobs. Sometimes, however, a Dutch team leader who didn't know me asked what I was doing there and took me to the room with the men. I didn't say anything, but it was nice for me then, even though the work was harder. However, after a short time my old leader would always come and take me back. Luckily she didn't call me by name.

These incidents did not escape the attention of the main boss. She invited me for an interview. She'd noticed that my roommate was my (now ex-) girlfriend. She came out to us: she was a lesbian. Humbled, I told

her about myself and then she offered something I hadn't even thought of at the time—a badge with my preferred name on it!

Unfortunately it was too late for that; people were talking, and I refused out of fear for my own safety.

On my return to Poland, I familiarised myself with the procedure for legally changing my personal details to male. I carried out and collected everything myself for the court session. I filled in a template, including test results, opinions from a sexologist and psychologist, and an application for cost exemption.

My mother had to be present at the first hearing. The court's questions were quite ordinary: about childhood, my favourite games. My mother told the truth, but didn't elaborate. For example, "What games did your child prefer?" Mum: "Dolls, she had a lot of them, she played when someone came over." I was bitter because moments earlier I had been talking about Lego. "And when her friends left?" Mum: "Then she would draw or play with blocks." I played with dolls with my female friends because I wanted to fit in! Later, the court asked mum what she thought about my gender correction, whether she consented. It was reluctant, but she gave her consent.

After changing my documents, I tried to have my first operation (breast removal) through the National Health Service. The problem was that the breasts were too large to qualify for reimbursable gynaecomastia for men.

I've sometimes heard about bad treatment of trans people, but I myself have also encountered positive or neutral reactions. Doctors who had no experience of a "case" such as mine asked for details and were impressed by the effect of hormones. Even though I didn't have male records at the time, they addressed me in my preferred form. The world was becoming a better place for me.

The physician I visited was very moved and empathetic. She called some doctors she knew to ask if some quicker procedures could be applied, but in the end it didn't work out.

The only option they suggested was first to have liposuction, or breast reduction, and when the size fell under the gynaecomastia limit to have them removed individually. I didn't relish the prospect of walking around with one breast and waiting for the other to be removed, but I had no choice. I called the number; the first appointment was in three years.

A few days later, encouraged by my friend, I set up a collection page on a crowdfunding site. I was only trying to raise money for a ticket to the Netherlands so that, once there, I could earn enough to pay for my surgery myself.

I managed to raise the money quite quickly.

This time it was better, although I went through a lot of stress at the beginning.

I told the agency that I'd changed my PESEL.[1] They pressed me very hard to tell them why this had happened, as it's not a very common situation. I kept it to myself.

The Dutch officials accepted the information without much fuss. I was irritated by this because during the conversation with the official, one of the intermediaries came up to us and kept asking for my PESEL. He only let it go after the official explained to him that it wasn't a problem for them, because they don't register Polish identity numbers anyway. I was terrified at the time that it would all come out.

At work, however, things were much better. I felt free. I was happy to openly buy men's cosmetics and clothes, and speak using male forms. Often, girls asked me to help them at work as well.

Unfortunately, a few weeks later, I was sent back to Poland due to a physical work-related illness—pigmentary glaucoma. My world came crashing down; I was so close to raising the full amount, and instead my dream was slipping away and I was in danger of losing my sight. They sent me away because my insurance didn't cover the procedure that would save my vision.

I wrote about the whole thing for a fundraising event and, I don't even know when, various pages, such as Tęczówka Association[2] and PrideParade, shared it on Facebook. Later, there was an article about my story in *Replika* magazine, through which I met many wonderful people who later looked after me.[3]

The surgery, which cost just under 13,000 zlotys, took place in November without any major complications. Just a day later, I put on the shirt I knew so well and tears welled up in my eyes. The T-shirt I knew so well, only now on a flat chest. Later, when I took off my post-op clothes, it felt like I was walking around in pyjamas—there was no other material between my body and the shirt!

1 PESEL (Powszechny Elektroniczny System Ewidencji Ludności; Universal Electronic System for Registration of the Population) is the name of an identity database for Polish citizen created in 1979; it is also used to refer to an 11-digit identification number assigned to every citizen of the Polish state. One of the numbers specifies gender, so sex reassignment requires a correction to one's PESEL number.

2 Stowarzyszenie Tęczówka (lit. Iris Society) is an LGBT+ organisation formed in 2011 in Silesia, an outgrowth of a local chapter of Campaign Against Homophobia (see n. 26 on p. 82). *Tęczówka* (iris) and *tęcza* (rainbow) are related terms in Polish.

3 *Replika*—see note 14 on p. 61.

I remember my first trip to a tea shop and how I couldn't believe it wasn't all a dream; that I had the life I wanted. I kept staring at my chest. Four hours of a surgeon's work that had changed years.

Very soon I started to be confident, all smiles. This self-confidence was noticed by strangers: viewers of the YouTube channel Transbros, where I made/recorded videos about being transgender. Thanks to the channel, I was also invited to give training sessions on the everyday life of transgender people, which only boosted my confidence.

A year later, I had a laparoscopic hysterectomy through the National Health Service, because I had health problems related to this organ.

I waited despondently outside the doctor's office for my turn, seeing a new mum visiting her baby, with her partner waiting beside her. It saddened me that I would miss out on such joy, that I wouldn't be able to be like the man next to me. I will miss out on the joy of my beloved's pregnancy, of taking care of her during this difficult period, and then the anticipation of seeing the baby for the first time. I still considered the possibility of weaning off hormones and turning to a surrogate, but I couldn't imagine going off hormones completely after almost six years of HRT[4] so I gave up. The problems with my female organs and the fact that I'd have to do without hormones for a very long time in order for an egg cell to be healthy also factored into this decision. My grief was mounting because I was about to lose this opportunity forever.

The gynaecology ward did very well, and they even apologised for placing me in the same room as the women; they put up a screen and for a few days the staff were so discreet that other patients in the room with me didn't know that I'd had exactly the same operation as them. They initially thought there was no accommodation in the hospital and that's why I was placed there. There were some complications; I had internal bleeding and a second surgery was performed, this time via abdominal dissection. After this, all was well and I was able to recover without further problems.

I'm happy with my path now. And with the decision I made years ago to fight for myself. I'm proud of the fact that I didn't give up.

Music played a big role then, inspiring me and being present in every aspect of my life. I owe a lot the singer Igor Herbut, who kept saying that dreams do come true; I believed him.[5]

4 Hormone Replacement Therapy.

5 Igor Herbut (b. 1990) is a Polish singer of Lemko origin. Lemkos are an ethnic minority in Poland, originating in the Carpathian mountains and closely related—in language and culture—to Ukrainians. Because of that kinship, they were forcibly resettled into the west of the country after World War II to eradicate their cultural background.

I promised myself that one day I would tell him my story—and when I was running out of hope, that's what kept me going. The unfulfilled promise and the thought that he might not learn about my story, when he'd been such a great influence on me. It was because of him that I became interested in the Lemko language, as well as Ukrainian; I fell in love with the piano, an instrument that gave me a lot in return.

I realised it didn't matter if you were born with musical ability or not, if you had a musical ear or an expensive piano. Without these talents, I was able to get as far as anyone else on an old keyboard with 61 keys. The path proved to be a little longer, but it was also very rewarding. The instrument made the negative kind of jealousy vanish from my life.

I fulfilled my promise, and Igor gave me a hug.

From time to time I attended meetings of support groups for transgender people, which are organised in Katowice by the Tęczówka Association. I never thought that I'd find such amazing people there and that some of them would become my friends.

I feel fulfilled at my current job—I work in game development, which is a creative environment. The salary isn't great, but it's enough for me to make a living.

I want to buy a flat, marry my beloved, adopt a child and have a pet. Improve my piano skills, help transgender people, and catch up on my travels. I look to the future with optimism, and thoughts about the political situation in Poland and the final surgery (will I be able to earn enough money for it by my 30th birthday; won't there be complications?) are the only things that sometimes worry me.

Whatever happens—it will simply complete my own story.

17

TOM(ASZ) SZOSTEK [Born in 1980 in Pasłęk, cis gay man, lives in Edmonton, Canada.]

10 Years in Canada

My motives for moving across the ocean weren't particularly well-developed. I think it was really nothing but a panicked escape. Exhausted by the fear of everyday street-level homophobia; hounded by constant doubt about my personal safety; bugged by an ingrained shame of being gay in front of friends and family; humiliated by needling comments about Sergo's Ukrainian background—I know I hurt him so many times because I continued to rely on the only way of thinking the society that raised me had on offer. The level of discomfort (fear) became so high that I decided to go on a crazy adventure, to abandon everyone and everything. I stayed with Sergo partly by accident. It was his education that helped me make the safest getaway imaginable.

It is just as depressing to recall how much I pined for Polishness for the first few years. I'm pretty sure I just couldn't operate without a homophobic society around me. Not having to constantly defend myself made my life seem pointless. I hoped to find purpose in some local organisation, but came up empty. Maybe the form of activism I'd inherited wasn't up to local standards?

After the first year, I was positively eager to visit Poland. I was anxious to see my friends and family, eat a *drożdżówka* and a tub of *Bieluch* cream cheese.[1] I wanted to go grab a coffee on Chłodna Street, visit the Warsaw Zoo and the Centre for Contemporary Art.[2] The Polishness I had longed for caught up with me by the time I reached the airport in London. As we ambled toward the Warsaw-bound plane, me and Sergo heard shouts of "FAGGOTS!!!" After a year in Canada, without a hint of a smidge of direct confrontation with any homophobes, this came as a shock to me and left me completely incredulous. In one second, all the trauma and the panicked fear came back with a vengeance.

Moving to Canada saved my dignity. Not the one that's about valour and pride, but the kind I kept with me every day, personal dignity. Canada

1 *Drożdżówka*—a type of crusted, yeasty sweet bun; *Bieluch*—a brand of cream cheese named for the protective ghost of a chalk mine in Chełm (*Duch Bieluch*, Whitey the Ghost).

2 Centre for Contemporary Art (Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej)—an arts space at the Ujazdowski Castle in the centre of Warsaw.

toppled me from my noble pedestal of gaydom, turning me into a face in the crowd. It didn't rob me of my peculiar features, but it did make it clear to me that they were indistinct from anybody else's, signposts of various needs, features of other people. The move saved my relationship with Sergo. It might sound superficial, but these things make you more practical. Me and Sergo had been a couple in Poland for eight years, with well-paying jobs, supportive families, and friends. But it was in Canada that we began to call our apartment a home, that we began also to work on our lifetime economic plan, and that we were formally a couple from day one. And no one ever dared question that. Abandoning Poland helped me focus on my relationship and understand the disrepair it had fallen into—understand how much attention it required after I've treated it as little more than a figment of my imagination for so many years. Interestingly, life in Canada made me recognise how privileged I was in my relationship. Understanding the problems of other people and other groups required—and still does—that I change my own behaviours and habits.

I still miss a lot of people and places in Poland. In part, my escape feels to me like admitting defeat. I'm sorry for not being a part of Polish LGBTQ activism. I admire the work of Polish activists of all genders, but I also see the troubling amount of exhaustion, fear, and regret that they live with. I'm worried for the new generation stifled by the conditions and resonance of debate over LGBTQ issues in Poland. I have no way of knowing how overwhelming it must be just to know you're a part of the LGBTQ community in a Polish society that's soaked in such a condensed homophobia.

18

MAGDA [Lesbian cis woman born in 1974 in Lublin, lives in Warsaw.]

Her name was Agnieszka. We were six years old and went to kindergarten together. I liked her a lot, but there was a notion rattling about in my six-year-old mind: that only boys can chase after girls. So I took off my skirt and pretended that tights were trousers, that I was a knight, and a stick was my sword.

I realised more clearly that I liked girls towards the end of elementary school. I wore boy's clothes, no dresses or skirts. I played bottle cap races and football with boys on our block, I stole cigarettes from my parents. Communism collapsed in Poland, and I struggled with my shame. In the 1990s homosexuality was a taboo subject. Lublin, my home town, was full of churches and students from the Catholic University of Lublin, but no gays and lesbians (at least not as far as its residents were aware). Not much has changed to this day.[1]

In high school I met my first love. She was the prettiest girl in the whole school. The guys were crazy about her. My advantage over them was that I was serious, didn't laugh at dumb teenage jokes, and knew how to listen. Of course we kept our relationship hidden from everyone, but they whispered anyway. I don't remember how our parents found out about us, but when they did—trouble began. We were forbidden from seeing each other. I was considered a troublemaker, leading decent schoolgirls down the wrong path. My mother made fun of me and I had no support from anyone in my family. In those days there were no cell phones and no Internet. There were no gay bars in Lublin. There was nowhere to meet and no one to talk to. We often skipped classes so we could spend time with each other. We would hang around town when it was warm outside, and in winter we would usually go to my apartment or hers. I remember one day when her father unexpectedly came back early: I hid in the closet and waited for him to go out to get groceries, or to fall asleep after dinner.

1 The Catholic University of Lublin (Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski, KUL) is a Church-run university established in 1918; since 2005, it bears the name of John Paul II. The university receives funding from the state and its diplomas are fully recognised in the country. Before 1989, it enjoyed a relatively broad autonomy and was perceived as a willing partner to non-Catholic circles within the democratic opposition. Since then, it had shifted decidedly toward conservatism. One of KUL's graduates is Przemysław Czarnek, perhaps the most aggressive driver of the campaign of homophobia and transphobia in 2019–2020 (see more in the Introduction, p. XVI).

There were many situations like that. After a while, I realised that you could buy a LGBT+ magazine called *Inaczej* at news stands. There were adverts in it, girls looking for each other. We met a few people that way. We managed to find a friendly environment, and to meet people from all over the country. My best memories are of trips to so-called "camp sites." These were trips to Krzywe lake near Olsztyn, organised by Lambda activists.[2] In the summer, we would hitch-hike to Masuria with backpacks and tents. Gays and lesbians from all over Poland met up there. Finally I could talk freely about everything and have sex without being afraid that someone would find out. I went there every year. It was also the place where I lost my girlfriend.

High school ended, and so did my relationship. I was suffocating in Lublin, suffocating living in the apartment with my parents. I got on a train and went to Warsaw. It was 1998.

I got a job in an accounting office. I'd graduated from the College of Accounting in Lublin, so that was the only occupation I was qualified for. I earned 500 zlotys a month, the minimum wage in Poland. It was enough to rent a room in a two-room apartment with my gay friend. The place was squalid and full of cockroaches. I didn't have much money left for food, I lived mainly on Chinese instant soup and frankfurters. But I was happy. The city provided me with anonymity, work, and friends. I studied philosophy there, at the ATK (Academy of Catholic Theology; today's Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University), as it was known then, even though I wasn't a believer. Two clubs, Rasko and Paradise, became my second home.[3]

I lost contact with my parents, my mother didn't want to know me and my father couldn't stand up to her. She didn't accept my orientation. She thought it was just a whim. She was ashamed of me. She longed to be able to boast about me, but instead I disgusted her. After two years, it dawned on her that if she didn't change that attitude she would lose her daughter. And that's how I learned that parents loving their children no matter what—was a myth.

2 *Lambda*—see n. 4 on p. 91.

3 Both names have a significant resonance for LGBT+ people who lived in Warsaw in the 1990s and 2000s. Rasko was a night club originally opened as a minute pub with karaoke nights, drag queen performances, and "Women's Wednesdays" (catering to lesbians), relocated in 2009 to a larger space, with an expanded dancefloor and a darkroom for gays. Paradise was a disco club created in the locker room of a stadium in Warsaw (itself remade into a marketplace after 1989). It had a spacious dancefloor and hosted dance tournaments, Gay Mister Poland competitions, and concerts accompanying the first Warsaw Prides. The club folded in 2005.

Polish attitudes changed very slowly. I had a girlfriend whose family was furious when they found out that she was living with a woman. My girlfriend's brother called my boss and threatened to tell all my customers that I was a lesbian. After six years I was fired from my job. The man I treated like a father showed me the door. Our relationship didn't last, my partner wasn't as tough as I was. But before that happened, we had plans to start a family. We bought a flat and thought about having a child. We put an ad on a gay and lesbian website saying that we were looking for a gay couple who wanted to become parents just like we did. It seemed to us that a child should have a father, that for the baby's sake it was worth putting up a front for our society that it had a "normal" family. Today that idea seems absurd, but in those days it would never have occurred to anyone that a gay man or lesbian could raise children. The only way to get pregnant was to obtain semen from a man and insert it directly into the vagina with a syringe. There were advertisements on the Internet and in queer magazines: "I will donate sperm," "Looking for a boy willing to donate sperm to a girl couple." Most men wanted to do it for free. I think they were hoping for exciting sex with a lesbian couple. Actual sex with a man wasn't an option, though. We'd tried it once. It didn't work, and our relationship ended soon after.

My life was one of hiding and telling lies. No one knew about me, I didn't tell anyone at work. It's hard to live like that. I was afraid of losing another job, of people talking behind my back and laughing at me. I was shy, self-conscious, and had all sorts of anxieties. I finally worked up the courage to tell a work colleague about myself. Her reaction changed my life. Thank you, Lidka, for shrugging your shoulders and saying "I know. So what? It's not a problem for me." I realised that all my fears were baseless, that people liked me and my sexual orientation didn't matter to them. At the age of thirty I felt that my life made sense, that I was able to be who I am and nobody would turn away from me because of it. It felt like being given a whole new life. I promised myself that I would never lie or pretend ever again.

At that time I met a girl with a child and a husband. She wasn't happy in her marriage. She got divorced, her parents bought her a flat, and we renovated it and moved in, the three of us. It seemed to me that this was it. I had a partner, a child, and a home. I was getting a pretty good salary, we could afford to spend holidays abroad and go out for dinner. Her son was young, I loved him like my own child. Idyllic times. To this day I don't know why it ended. I didn't know how to cope with it all. I had suicidal thoughts, I chain-smoked. I went to a psychiatrist who gave me medication

and referred me to a therapist. I felt cheated and lonely. The psychotherapist opened my eyes to several things: that I was still addicted to the way people looked at me and what they thought of me, that I didn't take care of myself nor my well-being, that I only wanted to please others, and that all these things, in the long run, made me unhappy.

I started to talk to a girl on Gadu-Gadu.[4] We've been together for nine years now.

So much has changed in our country in that time. Pride Parades have begun. My mother took part in the one in Lublin, where right-wing militias and ordinary hooligans threw firecrackers and stones at the participants.[5] My parents have undergone an amazing metamorphosis in their attitude toward gay people. My mother tries her best to make up for the years when she turned her back on me. And I'm grateful to her for that. We visit them every so often. My mother loves our daughter and is happy that, even though I didn't give birth to her, our Maja calls her "grandmother."

In Warsaw, Pride marches are a beautiful, colourful celebration. They are also disrupted by homophobes, but fortunately there's enough police protection. We went to the Pride Parade twice, with our daughter. The first time when she was one year old. We were pushing her pram, and people came up to us with smiles on their faces, congratulated us, and thanked us for coming together. Being surrounded by kind people makes you feel really wonderful. We marched for the second time when my daughter was two years old—as a little toddler, she was running around and waving a rainbow flag. People were taking pictures of her.

We made a joint decision to have IVF. Neither of us would have decided to have a child on her own. We went to a fertility clinic together. Nobody asked us about anything. It was still the time when Poland didn't have any regulations concerning in vitro. The procedure was very expensive and took an enormous toll on my partner's body. She had to take tons of medicines and receive injections into her abdomen throughout the pregnancy. The first time it didn't work—the foetus died at seven weeks. That was a difficult moment. We took a six-month break. And we succeeded the second time. We managed just in time, right before the introduction

4 Gadu-Gadu—see n. 5 on p. 224.

5 The first Pride Parade in Warsaw took place in 2001. The first Lublin Pride occurred in 2018, in a hostile atmosphere stoked by then-Voivode of the Lublin Province (later Minster of Education) Przemysław Czarnek, who railed against "promoting perversion, deviation, and aberration." The harassment inspired the attacks described by the author. The following year, during the next Lublin Pride, police apprehended a couple who intended to set off explosives among the participants.

of the law banning the use of IVF for single women without a male partner—a father.[6] We have frozen embryos that we cannot use. My country prohibits my partner from using her genetic material, from becoming a mother. Sometimes I wonder whether I shouldn't bring a case before the European Court against my own country. I worry about our daughter. What will happen to her if my partner dies or is unable to look after her? After all, according to the law I'm a stranger to her: no one cares that we are an actual family, that we bring her up and look after her together. Just thinking about it makes me want to scream with helplessness. Right now, everything revolves around this little girl. She's in kindergarten and so far no one's teased her, but I know other girls who are already going through hell. Their daughter is ridiculed because she doesn't have a father. Maja once asked about her dad, about his whereabouts. We replied that not all children have fathers. She didn't ask again, but I know it will come up one day. We promised ourselves that we never would lie to her and make up stories. We didn't do anything wrong, we shouldn't be forced to mislead our own child. Many people, including some gays, advised us against having children. Because society isn't ready, because it will be hard for our daughter, because others will tease her. But I believe that you can't be afraid. This is my life and nobody has the right to take away my joy in being a parent.

When the pandemic started, we worked remotely from home and my daughter didn't go to kindergarten. Working with a child at home is a nightmare. Living in a block of flats and not being able to go outside even for a moment was the worst thing about it. Maja sat in front of the TV most of the time so that we could work a bit. I watched her, and saw that staring at the screen had devastating effects on her mental progress. We've bought a house in the country with a large plot of land. We have to renovate it, and hope to move there next year. I'm glad that Maja will have the dog she dreams about, that she'll be able to run outside from dawn till dusk, that she'll be in contact with nature. Again, concerns about how people will receive us have returned. There's a lot of talk about the Polish countryside, that it's where people with very conservative views live. We're both non-believers, Maja was not baptised. Our friends think we're very brave to move to a completely different environment. But I'm

6 The Infertility Treatment Act of 2015 (*Ustawa z dnia 25 czerwca 2015 r. o leczeniu niepłodności*), passed by the liberal majority led by the Civic Platform party before Law and Justice regained power in Poland, provided access to in vitro fertilisation only to women in heterosexual unions. The law was deemed unconstitutional by the Commissioner for Human Rights.

not afraid any more. I know that the whole campaign against gays and lesbians is being fuelled by the authorities. I know that people aren't like that. Ignorance breeds hostility. We met the previous owners of the house and their family. They welcomed us very warmly, nobody cared that we were together. We help each other out, we give them clothes that Maja has grown out of, they mow the grass on the plot for us.

I know that I'm lucky. Because I have kind people around me, a family that supports us, a great boss and work colleagues I've never had to hide from or play-act for, because I have money that I work hard for.

So right now I'd like to thank them all:

Darling—for being there for me, even though I scatter my socks around and am a bully.

Dearest little Maja—for giving me so much happiness, like no person had before, and for the fact that I can be a parent.

Mum and Dad—for understanding, and because I can always count on you.

My mother-in-law—for loving us both unconditionally.

Our doctor—for taking care of us during the pregnancy and bringing our baby girl into the world—I will never forget your help.

Thank you to all my friends, acquaintances, and people at work—for being there.

Because the fact that you all exist means that this country will one day be welcoming to all people.

19

KORDIAN [Born in 2001 in Przemyśl, trans man, gay. Lives in Warsaw.]

A Diary

How to write an introduction to your life story
Hey, I'm a trans boy from a conservative town in Subcarpathia. I'm 19 and starting college this year. It's October 2020 and I feel like someone is going to kill me one day. Just like that, for being trans. I'm sure of it. If reading this makes you think I'm exaggerating—listen up. With this diary I want to show what being a trans person can be like. Each trans person has a different story: at various points in time they become aware of their gender identity, at various points in time they come out or don't at all, they change their clothing style or can't change it, they experience dysphoria or euphoria. However, most often I see in the media a stereotypical trans person—the one who has always known, who was ready to tell their parents about it when they were a few years old, who wants to go through all the surgeries, etc. I think that some people certainly identify with such characters, but I'm never able to find myself in them. Therefore, without further ado:

From the start of the transition to suing my parents
I lived in my small hometown until starting high school, which I attended in a much larger city. During that time (towards the end of middle school) I realised that I was trans. That is, I thought I definitely wasn't a girl, and then I spent about two years fighting with my own thoughts, as my mind tried to convince me, at all costs, that I had talked myself into all this. Because, surely, I can't be trans, I don't meet all the "requirements" imposed on trans people by society, and I didn't always know. Now I understand that this was a consequence of, among other things, the absolute absence of sex education in Poland, the lack of conversations with parents, and no representation in the media. Internalised transphobia was sown in me, as in many trans people, by the adults in my life. Today, I don't blame them, because it's not their fault that the Polish government doesn't want to educate citizens about issues pertaining to the LGBT+ community.

To this day, I still feel that I came to know myself completely by accident. Something in me stirred when I watched a video by an American YouTuber

who came out as a trans boy. The same feeling kept coming back when I followed my online trans friends. It wasn't until months later that I was able to put this feeling into words. In a few more months, I was ready to take my first small steps towards transition—cutting my hair (one of the happiest days in my life!), telling a few friends I wasn't a girl, slowly changing my clothing style. Because of the absence of examples of trans people in public spaces, films, TV series, who took just as long to start transitioning as I did, for a long time I felt that I was only pretending and wasn't actually trans. In retrospect, I can see that it was the major change I had to get used to.

Not until two years after that was I able to tell my parents. I was convinced that they'd throw me out on the street. Even though I knew they'd never do that to me. I've heard too many stories about LGBT+ teenagers being made homeless after coming out. If you're trans and you're telling someone about yourself, you're mostly just hoping they don't react with aggression. That you won't be left homeless. That you won't be killed. A neutral response was actually the best I could hope for at that moment. The act of coming out to my parents was both very emotional and not very successful. It was only after some time that their attitude started to improve, and it's currently better than I could ever have imagined. But right after coming out I was ready to cut ties with them. And I want other trans people to know that this is an option. You're not a bad child if you don't want anything to do with parents who don't accept the real you, bullying you by misgendering and deadnaming. You have the right to live with dignity and, contrary to popular belief, you can choose your family. You're free to surround yourself with friends who will love you for being you.

Coming out at school spanned roughly six months. There, I also set myself up for an indifferent reaction from teachers and students. Most of the time it was OK, but only because I got used to being asked which bathroom I was going to, whether I was going to have this and that surgery, whether I had already started taking testosterone. I got used to the fact that cisgendered colleagues wouldn't treat me like a human being, deserving of privacy and respect. Going to school when everyone knows you're trans is alienating. Boys didn't want to socialise with me in the same way they did with others, because in their eyes I wasn't a boy. Girls just ignored me, and those who didn't still treated me as "one of them." No matter who I spoke to in school, every interaction was embarrassing and dysphoria-inducing. The only really overt and explicit example of transphobia that occurred in my class was a discussion between two students and a teacher,

who defended trans people; the students openly admitted to being transphobic. Somehow this stuck with me throughout high school and by the end of my education I knew I had no place in that clique. Therefore, the only way to find friends was on the Internet. Even if someone turns out to be transphobic, they are not able to hurt me. That's how I found a group of very good friends, and a boyfriend. It's quite normal for rainbow youth to have friends living 300 or 3,000 kilometres away.

Over the last year I have obtained the diagnosis, begun the testosterone, had one surgery and sued my parents.[1] As for the latter—this is how the process of changing documents by trans people in Poland looks like. It doesn't matter how old you are, in order to change the gender designation on your ID, your parents have to give their consent. On my path, I met a trans boy who had to wait for his parents to die so he could have his documents changed. This is the reality for many trans people in this country. We sever contact with our transphobic family members and then just wait for them to die, so that we can start living.

And how the reality actually looks like

Getting the diagnosis, in my case, came down to spending a very large amount of money, which definitely accelerated a process that usually takes about six months. However, that doesn't change the fact that it was an incredibly humiliating, frustrating and depressing experience. One of the many steps I had to take to be diagnosed was filling in several long tests with contents that, as far as I was concerned, had nothing to do with gender identity. Why did I have to answer questions related to my orientation, to my sexual preference? I discuss these ridiculous questions in vague generalities, because actual quotes would be too disgusting to put in this memoir. Filling out the questionnaires was traumatic and that's when I realised that I'd never have privacy again. Every person I meet in the hospital, at school, in the local authority office has to know my entire history in order to help me with any given problem. It's all because I still have a deadname in my ID. I have to reveal myself to everyone and hope that I get a neutral response, not an aggressive one.

My new reality is the fear of seeing a doctor, visiting government offices, schools, riding public transport, trains, going to PE, going to the swimming pool. That I neglect my own health is less important than whether I feel safe. And I never feel comfortable in the aforementioned

1 Persons who undergo sex reassignment in Poland have to sue their parents to alter their identification data; for more, see the Introduction, p. XII.

situations—whether it's because I'll have to show someone an ID with the deadname or because someone might see the scars from my surgery. Being trans has excluded me from participating in life. It shouldn't be like that, yet in this country I really don't see any other way to survive at the moment. A lot of trans people are now openly talking about their identity, they are brave and defiant—and I'm happy for them. However, I'm not yet in the same place. For now, I still feel that I'm just a problem to everyone I meet and I should just get myself out of the way. I don't go to clubs, I don't go to the gym, I don't go to the library. I don't want to order any deliveries in my own name, I don't want to sign contracts for accommodation. For as long as all these actions involve me explaining and justifying my existence to complete strangers, I will avoid them.

Transition is the most gruelling process I can think of. It drags on for years, every juncture is incredibly dehumanising, humiliating, exhausting and incredibly expensive. There are no "transgender clinics" in Poland like those in England or the USA to help me in any way with my transition. No one can help me find the right doctors close to me or teach me how to inject testosterone. My reality in Poland is that of an incredible loneliness in everything I've got to do and a reluctant attitude from medical practitioners and clerks, whom I only ask to do their job. My reality is writing 30 emails to all the teachers about my name being so and so, having such and such pronouns, and praying that they don't turn out to be transphobes who flunk me at the end of the semester, just for that reason. My reality is an aversion to using the toilet anywhere outside my home. Social dysphoria ruins my life every day and is stronger than any other type of dysphoria.

My reality is also the fear of death. Between 22% and 43% of trans people have tried to kill themselves in their lifetime. Reflecting on these percentages, I'm not at all surprised by them. I don't say this due to a lack of empathy or compassion. I say it with an understanding of their situation. I'm not surprised by the trans people who have taken their own lives. Transition in Poland, as it exists today, the pervasive transphobia and the vilification of LGBT+ people often trigger suicidal thoughts in my mind. More trans people were murdered in the US through the first seven months of 2020 than in all of 2019 (source: National Center for Transgender Equality). This is the feedback that trans people are getting. We know that we can be killed just for existing. Non-white trans people have it even worse. We are currently seeing a rise in far-right trends around the world, affecting all ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, and transgender people. That's our reality—the fear, the lack of strength to fight, the absence of

a place for us in society, of understanding, and of help (whether from cis and straight people or from cis gay persons).

How I learned to like myself

That's a lie right in the title of the subsection—I still don't like myself. But I did have a few moments where I realised I was myself, in the right body (no, I don't agree with the narrative that as a trans boy I'm trapped in a woman's body), on the right path, and around the right people. These moments never last very long, but I'll remember them for the rest of my life. One of them is the Pride Parade in June 2019 in Warsaw. Walking through the streets, holding my boyfriend's hand, singing along to Britney Spears—I can't imagine any other place I'd rather have been at that time. Looking in the mirror a few days after my mastectomy and realising that a real boy was looking back at me. The first few times my voice broke down after starting hormone therapy. The first few times a checkout clerk addressed me "Sir." Usually little details like that allow me to pause, at least for a moment, amidst the chaos we call transition; and then I can realise that things are actually changing for the better.

How to be the plague during the plague

I want to devote a subchapter to my life during the pandemic, because in 2020 I've noticed an increasingly aggressive vilification of the LGBT+ community in Poland. Besides, quarantine for young people involves studying remotely, and staying at home with parents that often don't accept you. Fortunately, I avoided attending remote classes with a deadname, which I'd have to look at for several hours a day, but I realise how many trans teenagers in Poland are worse off than me. I've met a lot of people online who have experienced more misgendering on Zoom than they had before the lockdown. Whether it's because teachers in person are better at remembering such things, or because fewer people online will feel the obligation to turn on their mics and stand up for the trans person in question. The pandemic has definitely affected the mental health of LGBT+ people around the world, including mine. The complete isolation from my friends, whom I was previously able to see on a daily or, let's say, monthly basis, around whom I feel safest while discussing topics that matter to me, has made me, and still makes me, feel worse in general, compared to the way I'd been before the pandemic.

The lockdown also made me finally understand that there is no place for me in Poland. Among the bigger incidents that hit me, as a transgender person, I can name: the presidential election and the dehumanisation of

the LGBT+ community by A. Duda, the unjust detention of Margot and the "jokes" about rape in prison, D. Piontkowski describing people who painted the names of victims of homophobia and transphobia on the walls of the Ministry of Education building: "These are barbarians and idiots who cannot honour Polish traditions and monuments in Poland, and this should be unequivocally denounced," Children's Ombudsman M. Pawlak stating that sex educators "give children drugs in order to change their sex," P. Czarnek, who said: "These people are not equal to normal people."[2] The list could go on and on, but the situations mentioned above have stayed with me the most. What is it like to hear another rant about the LGBT+ community every day from some old straight fart who runs this country? After all these years, I just got used to it, it's a daily occurrence for me. Sometimes it affects me, but mostly I'm prepared to hear such words coming from people in Poland. I can't see either place or time to improve our situation in the country before it's too late. If it's not too late already—"LGBT ideology"—free zones do exist and are subsidised by the government. LGBT+ people are being thrown into detention from street roundups and people on the outside (MPs from the Razem party acting for Margot and other summer 2020 detainees) aren't being given access to information about their whereabouts. We've already become an ideology, not people. It is already too late.

Conclusion

I'm going to try to be concise in this closing piece—I want to give the readers a few tips while I have the floor. If you're a cisgender person—don't ever ask for my deadname, don't ask which bathroom I go to, don't ask what surgeries I've had, don't ask what surgeries I'm going to have, don't ask what's between my legs, don't ask how I have sex, don't say you find it hard to remember my pronouns/name, don't ignore the transphobic behaviour of your friends; respond to transphobia directed at me, because it will always be you who has a more important voice than someone regarded as less than human. If you are a doctor—educate yourself on issues related to the LGBT+ community, if you are a teacher—support your rainbow students openly and in front of other teachers, if you are a parent—love your child. I could keep on listing such tips indefinitely, but let me sum it all up with the following sentence: if you're a human being—act like one.

2 For more on the political and social backdrop of the period, see the Introduction.

20

KINGA KOSIŃSKA [Born in 1982, straight woman after gender correction. Grew up in Czeladź, a city of 30,000 inhabitants in the south-western region of Silesia, where she still lives.]

Greetings from My Loneliness

Mum and dad have always loved me dearly. They would show it with indulgence, deference, and by simply talking about it. I used to wrestle with my dad a lot. There was some sort of tension between us. I'd sit on top of him and arm-wrestle with him and then put his face against mine. My cheeks were burning from rubbing against his stubble. When I did something wrong, my mother would often take a swing at me with a slipper, which amuses me today, but the violence was never actualised. I covered myself with my arms and asked her not to hit me.

In my neighbourhood, the kids would get together to play "jumping gum," hide-and-seek, or hare and hounds. I felt part of this community then. Once a stranger walked by and said to me and a younger friend that it was strange that boys were playing girls' games. In kindergarten I was considered a very well-behaved child. On one occasion, when I was naughty, I received a firm spanking from a teacher: she hit me with a toy drumstick, and it wasn't a game that time around.

I was fascinated with my girlfriends. I admired their beauty, their charm; I wanted to be like them. Once someone took a picture of me and one of the girls picking flowers in a meadow near the school. They laughed that we were a couple in love. I was very close to that girl and used to go over to her place to visit her. We played all sorts of games. When she moved to another city, I felt abandoned. My friends who lived two floors below abandoned me in a similar way. Two younger boys and a girl. In the neighbourhood we used to stick together. After they had left, I couldn't find myself. I didn't have many people to play with. Their role was partly taken over by a family of Roma origin. Two sisters and a boy. They also played truant a lot. They didn't have many friends either; that's what we had in common. Later they moved away, like the rest of my peers.

I started school with a lot of enthusiasm. It died down quite quickly when people started making fun of me. I had a bigger head and was teased. I was slowly becoming an outcast. I started listening to a lot of music. I was always sensitive to it. I used to watch TV shows: *Tęczowy Music Box* and

Pan Tik Tak.[1] They had great songs, and the content enriched my young sensibility.

I hated PE classes. I was a klutz. I was constantly making excuses, saying I was unwell, and when that didn't work, I started playing truant. My peers' teasing began to discourage me from socialising. I liked to spend time alone. On the few occasions I played truant, my parents would catch me, coming home early from work. I told them we'd been allowed to leave class earlier. This didn't always sound very plausible. At parent-teacher meetings, my mother found out about my numerous absences and was angry. She felt there was some problem, but I was ashamed that the children were laughing at me and preferred to keep quiet. On one occasion she took me to a psychologist. The man told me to draw a school, which I did, whereupon he said that there were no children there at all in the drawing, and that I must feel very lonely.

I was walking down the pavement with my parents one day, slightly ahead of them. Dad made a comment about me walking like a "missy," and mum laughed. I tried to correct it later. I really liked the way models walked at fashion shows, and wanted to be like them. As a result, everyone started paying attention to my gait. I practised in front of the mirror to put my feet forward, a bit apart, like the boys. I got the nickname "missy." I admired popular singers like Mariah Carey and Edyta Górniak.[2] I dreamt that I too was a famous singer. Instead, I became the neighbourhood fag with a head that was too large.

As the years went by, I started to like boys and was overcome by very intense desire. I started puberty quickly, as early as the seventh grade of primary school. I developed thick hair on my arms and legs, grew an Adam's apple, and had terrible zits. Of course, they started calling me "pimple face." Once someone gave me such a strong kick in the butt at the school entrance that it totally stunned me. Nobody said anything; it was only natural.

I ran away from home on two separate occasions. I was wandering around aimlessly, missing so many school days that I didn't know what

1 *Tęczowy Music Box* (Rainbow Music Box) was a children's TV music show broadcast in the early 1990s. *Tik-Tak* was a musical and educational TV show for children featuring both live actors and puppets, broadcast in 1982–1999 and hosted by Pan Tik-Tak (Mr. Tick-Tock).

2 Edyta Górniak (b. 1972) is a Polish pop singer who channels the image of a modern diva. She first came to prominence with her performance at the 1994 Eurovision Contest—Poland's debut appearance—where she finished second with "To nie ja" ("It's not I"), a classic power ballad.

to do about it, and nobody really knew or liked me. I came home in the morning, when the police were already looking for me. There was a lot of fuss and all the people from school found out, which only cemented my status as a freak. I remember walking down the road; it was already dark, and I didn't really know where I was going. Just as far as possible from... myself. Yes, I know it's impossible to escape from oneself. I tried to take my mother's pills, but I always just felt sick and threw up. Once I nearly blew up my flat because I'd opened all the taps on the gas cooker. The neighbours knocked, concerned about the smell. I had to air out the flat quickly.

I skipped classes, faked PE exemptions, then had to catch up on everything and had tests in all subjects one after another. Fortunately, I had a good memory and cramming wasn't difficult. A week after an exam I couldn't remember anything. I was told to start a special notebook in which my form tutor would confirm my presence at all the day's classes. My mother checked it carefully afterwards.

I was ashamed in front of the boys. They intimidated me and called me names; I was afraid. At the same time, they stirred up wild desire in me. I masturbated a lot. I had one friend at the time who defended me a bit. He came from a poorer family and I think he understood life better. His older brother was disabled and his mother was sickly and very intellectually simple. We often saw her in the street talking to herself about something, in a raised voice. Our paths diverged when we finished primary school.

Back then, a great sadness began to grow inside me, I wasn't able to pin down its origin. It was more than rejection by others and a feeling of being scapegoated. I felt that something was wrong with me, that there was no place for me in this world. I was running away from it into music. I felt terribly lonely.

I got into vocational high school by accident. To tell the truth, it was because I had no idea what to do with my life. I took an IQ test and was advised to opt for a dispensary class at a high school in Sosnowiec. In a way, it was a new beginning for me. Nobody knew me there. Most of the class were girls, and there were only five boys, me included. I felt relieved. I made friends with two girls, and a cardiologist friend got me an exemption from PE classes. The girls and I went to concerts; they liked me and I liked them. I'd never felt such a sense of belonging, at least not since early childhood. I later found out that they each had a crush on me. I fantasised at the time that I was a girl without a face, experiencing all the situations that happened to me the way I would if I were who I should have been.

I didn't label this process, though. Through these friends I met two other girls. We met at parties. I was closest to Ewa. I realised over time that she liked me as a guy. I took advantage of that a little bit. I tried to tell myself that I was a guy after all and that there would never be any alternative to that state. Finally, we kissed one day, but I panicked and tried to get out of it as quickly as possible. She sensed this and didn't hold a grudge. And so we settled on being just friends.

Sometimes an older person would take me for a woman when asking me the time, for example. I liked that very much. By then I had long hair, which I tied up in a ponytail. I still remember my parents forcing me to cut it at an early age. It was a nightmare. I dreamt of having long hair. I rebelled at the end of primary school, and went to the prom with long hair. I remember how alienated I felt at that party. I arrived and went home alone, while others went together in happy groups. The high school prom was already different. I'd found my crowd, a band that stuck together. I went with Ewa. Actually, I was dreaming of a beautiful dress and make-up, but that desire was hidden very deep. I was just trying to have fun in my suit, man's shirt, and tie. I felt well liked, and it empowered me; even though I was sometimes called names outside my trusted circle, I didn't give in to it the way I had in my primary school days. I remember that when I would return from school in Sosnowiec to my town, I often felt short of breath. Life was different there because no one knew how much I was oppressed and bullied.

I didn't know what to do with myself after high school. I decided to apply for a philosophy degree at the University of Silesia. Surprisingly, I got in and started classes in October. Little did I know that that month would determine my whole life—or maybe, on the contrary, I sensed it and told myself it was now or never.

My group included Patryk; we remained close and I quickly fell in love with him. I liked a lot of boys at that time, by the way. I began to agonise over the fact that they'd never look at me the way I wanted them to. Right then and there, it dawned on me that I didn't want to join another community as a man. I felt subconsciously that I had to decide upon something, but I didn't really know what that was. Who was I, really? In Katowice, I used to buy gay pornographic press like *Adam*, as well as *Inaczej* magazine.[3] I was getting hornier and hornier, looking for an outlet for these emotions.

3 *Adam* is a gay magazine established in 1998 featuring erotic imagery, based on similar Czech titles and originally published by the Czech company Saturn Publishing, later acquired by the Polish Softpress. *Inaczej*—see n. 15 on p. 64.

However, in my fantasies I did not picture myself as a man. I was more focused on adoring the male body of a potential partner.

I finally stopped attending classes and told my mother that I was dropping out of university. At the time, my father stood on the fringes of my existence, watching me silently with a look on his face that made it clear that I wasn't really living up to his expectations. He had never been a model of masculinity for me. Any mending of household malfunctions has always been my mother's responsibility. Once I remember he forced me to go out and play basketball in front of the apartment block. Under pressure, I went out and wandered the surrounding fields. A total social outcast.

And finally, something inside me snapped. I showed my mother an issue of *Inaczej* magazine and told her to read it for herself. She didn't understand and asked what it all meant. I stammered that I was attracted to boys and felt bad in general. That I didn't know what the future had in store for me. A few days later, while watching a TV show together, *Rozmowy w toku,*[4] an episode featuring transgender people, I declared that this also applied to me. We agreed that I needed to go to a specialist. I know she was hoping that he'd conclude that I simply had some psychological disorder. The sexologist said that if I wanted, I could be diagnosed by one of his psychologist colleagues, whom I began going to see. This went on for a year and a half. I wasn't working at the time. I was getting some social benefits because of my congenital heart defect. Interestingly, I felt that I was becoming part of the social margins, that from then on I'd always be on the fringes of society.

Seeing the psychologist in Katowice was tiring; he kept postponing appointments, dismissing me. I was impatient, felt trapped. I wanted to be reaffirmed in my choices there and then. I wanted to become a woman as if by a wave of a magic wand. I dreamt of how wonderful it would be to finally be rid of the penis I had so relentlessly used to satisfy my urges, feeling pleasure and self-loathing at the same time. I wanted to have breasts and feel men's gaze. That was important to me. People are supposed to see me as a woman, because I am one. This is what my life is supposed to be like!

At the time, I was hanging out with my two girlfriends. Ewa was the most frequent visitor, and I came out to her about being gay in a letter, and then in person to both of them—about wanting to be fully female. They accepted this. However, in practice only Ewa stood by me. So on

4 *Rozmowy w toku* (lit. Talks in Progress) was a Polish TV talk-show along the lines of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, broadcast in 2000–2016 on the private TVN network, often addressing controversial questions in a superficially scandalous manner; at the same time, it contributed significantly to breaching taboos, including those concerning non-heteronormativity.

a day-to-day basis I sat at home and waited for a miracle. It never came. The hormone treatment proved to be difficult. My body reacted badly to it, and I wasn't happy with the results. At the time, I was embarrassed to show up in my neighbourhood in typically feminine clothes. I tended to go for a gender-neutral style and people who didn't know me often gave me confused looks, probably wondering whether I was a woman or a man.

I longed to have a vagina, to take on the gender roles of a woman. The slow development of my breasts gave me a certain satisfaction, but I felt mostly angry at life, and at the doctors for not guiding me properly with medication. In my own eyes I still looked like a man. I was disgusted with myself, punching my body, trying to punish myself for having such a messed up existence.

Finally, the day of the proper diagnosis arrived and the first court hearing took place. It went quite smoothly. My parents and I spoke in turn, afterwards I was referred for an expert examination in Warsaw. The visit also went quite smoothly, but I remember a scene in the street: when asking a passer-by about something, he addressed me using the male form, which hurt me a lot. However, I passed the expert tests and at the next hearing I was deemed to be female. I made an appointment for surgery in Gdańsk soon after my new identity card was issued. The physician at the place looked at me suspiciously; according to him I wasn't a typical case, probably not feminine enough. Typical female outfits interested me moderately, to say the least. I wished for a physical transformation. I put on delicate make-up to hide the traces of stubble and to make my face appear more delicate. This, however, had mediocre results in my opinion. Still, the doctor accepted the diagnosis, and the surgery went very well. There was no great pain. I felt strong jolts of adrenaline: I had achieved my goal, after everything. It turned out that I was quite "shallow," but I wasn't thinking that much about sexual intercourse at the time. I was just happy to finally have the vagina I longed for.

I wanted to start a new life. I desperately desired this, and was hungry for social fulfilment as a woman. I decided to train to become a social worker. I passed a simple exam and started my course. However, I soon realised that something was wrong. People were eyeing me suspiciously, staring, not at all surreptitiously, at my crotch. I panicked; I felt they had discovered my past, and I didn't want them to. I wished to participate in life on equal terms with other women. That's when I started to experience an extreme form of escapist tendencies. I dropped out of school and was slowly sinking into the depths of depression. The whole transition felt like a huge disaster. I didn't see a way forward in life. I attempted suicide.

I tried to slit my wrists. I ended up in a psychiatric hospital. Shortly after leaving, I swallowed a lot of psychotropic tablets and returned to the facility. I remember one patient there in particular. She had heavy make-up, wore a sharp pink dressing gown, and used to lie down on the edge of the bed, snuggling her head against a small radio that was playing sorrowful music from the Złote Przeboje (Golden Hits) station. On some level I knew then that I'd become like her, though in my own way. My parents were devastated. They visited me in the hospital, and supported me. Something inside me snapped and I realised that I couldn't do this to them again. I started having treatment, which continues to this day.

As the months passed after the operation, my body began to transform more and more in the feminine direction. My figure took on a woman's shape, my breasts became more prominent. I started having laser hair removal treatments on my face, which improved its appearance. I plucked my eyebrows with tweezers. I saw a tiny light within myself, which gave me strength at the time. Antidepressant medication treatment also did its part.

I didn't have a job and felt that I was a burden to my parents. So I decided to get a grip and started looking for some work. I landed on a production floor. This job, although monotonous, afforded me oblivion; I felt part of something bigger. Apart from the warehousemen, the factory staff were all women. That gave me satisfaction. I started to take more care of myself, and matched my make-up to my clothes. I felt like one of the women, and finally got some air in my lungs. I was accepted there. I went out to socialise after work with people who had no idea about my past. Unfortunately, there was accompanying anxiety about whether someone who'd recognise me would end up working that job in a different city; and how the women working with me would react. I remember how one time, when I got off the bus coming back from work, I heard a young man's voice behind me. "You fucking tranny." I didn't turn around. Another occasion: "You'll never be a woman. You fucking tranny. You'll always be a fag." Same voice. I didn't turn around again. His companion was calming him down, telling him to stop already. I was very hurt. I also remember once when I was walking to the bus stop for work: there's a hill by the road, and a couple of guys were standing at the top. They started yelling at me. "Come on, I'll fuck you. Faggot!" It was winter and they started throwing lumps of snow at me, which shattered by my feet. I walked steadily, not speeding up to avoid giving them the satisfaction. I prayed that they would not hit me. That day, when I got home, I burst into bitter tears. I was totally shaken. Why were they doing this to me? After all, I hadn't done anything to anyone. I lived and worked normally. I was afraid of what would happen

next. The next day my dad walked me to the bus stop. After that, it didn't happen again. Dad grew to trust me, and our relationship became calm, interspersed with moments of tenderness. I felt comfortable and safe with my parents. I didn't want to go anywhere, I didn't want to run away. I thought I couldn't cope on my own, that I was too weak.

At that time I was looking for trans people. Through a colleague from the Katowice LGBT association I met Anna, older than me, a woman with infantile cerebral palsy. Her strength impressed me a lot. Yet I still felt that I was inferior, and that other trans women were much stronger than I was, making it tough to have relationships with them. Through this social circle I met Sebastian, a trans man. As they say, one thing led to another and we started dating. I'd always dreamt of a tall, dark-haired man. However, life has a way of revising every dream. He was shorter than me, and petite. It was with him that I lost my virginity. He entered me with his oversized clitoris, and I experienced very painfully then that I was a woman. I felt attractive around him, and wanted to be like that for him. Everything was just right. Although the whole thing ended quickly, it left a lasting mark on me. A long while later I started an affair with a trans man again. I concluded that they were probably the only ones who could see the real me. My target group. Again, it ended quickly and I vowed never to go down that road again. Then there was Marcin, a heterosexual cis man. He couldn't enter me, and finished while holding my breasts. I felt dirty, as so many women do. Like an instrument to satisfy man's needs. I've been single ever since. I dream of a great love, while stuck with the conviction that reality will never even come close. There's a girl in me, untouched by anyone, who loves art. I want to protect her at all costs. Sometimes I feel that she is the only one I have left.

At one point twin sisters, not at all resembling each other, started to work at the factory. They began to look at me closely; something didn't sit right with them. "You have such a low voice. I've never heard one like it. You're a hybrid. You should have been a bloke" They didn't know my story, but were simply being provocative. It brought me to a screeching halt which threw me off balance. I was trying to be strong, but it irked me deeply how people were carelessly judging me and affecting my wellbeing. I fought so hard for myself, and yet I was still like a leaf in the wind thrown around by the gusts of people's words. That hurt a lot. After a lot of disturbances, I left that job. I went to the UK for a few months, to work in a hotel as a maid and kitchen assistant. It wasn't easy, and I was physically exhausted, which affected my appearance. I was on duty from early morning until late at night, with breaks, which I slept through, completely

drained. In the mirror, wearing an apron, with no make-up and dark circles under my eyes, I looked pathetic. I fell in love with my boss at the time, a fact I was unable to hide. To this day I'm still inclined to romantic raptures, interspersed with lust towards men. It's just a matter of my imagination though. Today, in fact, I live like a nun. I work remotely, doing transcriptions. This allows me to be the master of my destiny in a way, while condemning me to a sort of social isolation. At least I'm not subjected to perpetual judgement. It was so tiring. I've experienced it so many times, and that's that. I've had enough! The downside: I have no health insurance and my income is very irregular. I also tried to enrol in Russian philology, but without success. I've always dreamed of singing, since my voice isn't too bad. However, after a phone conversation with a lady at the university, who mistook me for a man, I decided it was a no-go. A woman with a male singing voice: I don't think that can work.

I was searching all the time. I had prolonged periods of unemployment, when I felt like a social parasite, struggling for myself against my faithful sister, depression. I read, looking to books for inspiration, while trying to cope with strong suicidal urges. I was particularly interested in writers and poets who died by suicide, like Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Virginia Woolf. I felt a kinship of souls with them. The books allowed me to rise above the brutal reality. I began to rebuild my relationship with God. I arrived at the conclusion that maybe the fact that I still exist is thanks to Him. I became a fan of Jesus, of His inclusiveness. Thanks to a friend, I came across a group today called the Faith and Rainbow Foundation.[5] There I met people who, like me, cherished the beauty within themselves, and sought spirituality and harmony with the world. I developed a positive relationship mainly with the gay men in the group, and they still support me today. We went on religious retreats together. I enjoyed our reflections and prayers, and finally I was around other people. The fact that I was the only one there who'd been through gender correction singled me out, but in a positive way. It was flattering. I became a part of a community again, I belonged to something bigger. I realised that God was on my side, regardless of what the church authorities and right-wing activists and politicians claimed. This still represents an important turning point in my story. I opened myself up to other perspectives, became wiser, and matured spiritually. Now I don't volunteer any more, but to this day I can count on the people I met there and sometimes they even support me with small amounts of money, for which I'm very grateful.

5 Faith and Rainbow Foundation—see n. 3 on p. 91.

I was very active on Facebook back then, and kept in touch with people outside my region that way. I posted literary miniatures on my profile. People cheered me on to follow this path, which led to the publication of my first book, *Brudny róż*.[6] It's a strictly autobiographical story. By writing this text from scratch, years later, I'm trying to face my life, so this isn't just an excerpt from that book. It was not greeted with enthusiasm. Despite the fact that the vision of the Fourth Republic[7] and far-right sentiments took hold in the political arena, my confessions weren't even noticed by the typically left-leaning media. It reinforced my belief that my story was by no means special. I was disappointed that the book received few reviews and sold poorly. I struggled with myself and whether there was any point in continuing to write. However, the inner imperative to create prevailed and resulted in a second book, *Beza* (Meringue).[8] It tells the story of a woman with Down's syndrome who has dreams similar to mine and is, in a way, socially and sexually enslaved. This too was received rather coolly, which dampened my literary aspirations for a while.

I remember going to the Pride Parade in Warsaw with the Faith and Rainbow group. Quite a powerful experience. I carried the banner with great pride. And, once again, I felt that I belonged to something bigger, that I was part of a community. I felt that this was exactly where I was supposed to be. I've always held quite leftist views, and strived for as much personal freedom as possible. But I was forever enslaved by my own psyche. I'd like people to be able to self-actualise, to love, and to externalise what lies within their souls. It pains me that many people still don't feel this way. And, despite my difficult experiences, I've had a lot of support. Most of all from my parents and from LGBTQ+ people. I don't know how I would have managed without them and persevered to the point where I find myself now.

For me, home is a refuge from the starkness of reality, which is often too difficult to bear. I decorated my room in a deliberately kitsch style to give it a cosy feel, perhaps wanting to appease my inner child. It's cluttered with trinkets, books, vinyl records and CDs, things that give shape to my

6 Kinga Kosińska, *Brudny róż. Zapiski z życia, którego nie było* (Dusty Pink: Notes from a Life that Wasn't; Warszawa 2015).

7 *IV Rzeczpospolita* (Fourth Republic) is a conservative-liberal project of a moral rebirth of the Polish state, formulated in the early 2000s in response to the perceived inadequacy of the systemic change after 1989 (which ushered in the Third Republic, *III Rzeczpospolita*, signifying the severing of ties to the Polish People's Republic). The idea of the *IV Rzeczpospolita* draws inspiration from the history of post-war France and its transition from the Fourth to the Fifth Republic.

8 Kinga Kosińska, *Beza* (Warszawa 2019).

existence and allow me to escape the pain associated with it. Recently, my beloved Dad passed away. I remember how angry I used to feel for being so physically similar to him. Today, I'm proud of it. I used to rebel against the fact that I wasn't living up to his expectations, and mentally pushed myself away from him.

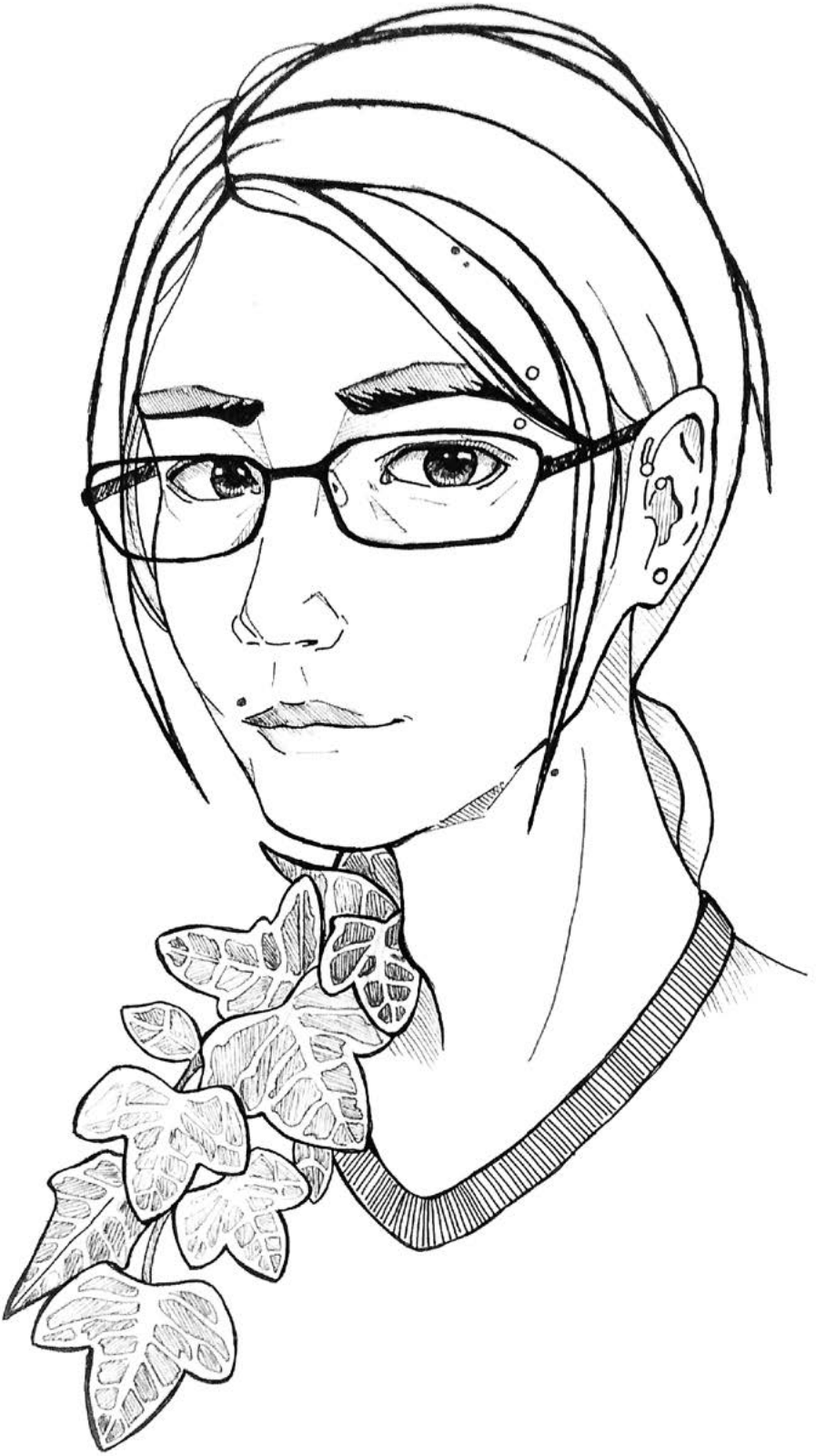
I find it amazing that we finally found a thread of understanding and solace in our roles of father and daughter. He loved me unconditionally as his child, and with that love he broke down the walls between us. I miss him terribly. This anguish is unbearable at times. Our relationship in recent years was full of affection and closeness, something I would have liked to last. He was a simple man, who didn't read books or watch films. Yet, within himself, he was able to face the biggest, most difficult questions. He was a masculine shoulder and a support to me. The only subject we argued over was that I no longer wanted to go out to work and preferred to work remotely. He couldn't comprehend that it was possible not to go to a workplace. My mum is more understanding and tries to understand the motives that drove, and still drive me.

Ewa vanished from my life years ago, although she was the person closest to me. Our paths parted abruptly as a result of her sleeping with Marcin, who I also cared about. Just life. Anyway, the mental gap between us became unbearable. I haven't been able to build a similar relationship with anybody else. There are some people in my life, in a way, but behind the glass of the internet, behind a smartphone. I don't know how to form relationships, and to this day I often feel disappointed, misunderstood. I wonder what impact my experiences have had on this. I don't socialise.

Today, I live alone with my mother. I don't have any particular dreams. Maybe I'd like to continue publishing books. In spite of everything. There's also a desire to sing lurking within me. Oh, to release an album. I can no longer tell whether that's possible or not. The line between the dreams of my excited imagination and reality often gets blurred. Perhaps I deliberately reject the latter. Maybe I have no talent and am just an unfulfilled neurotic with shaking hands and perpetually sweaty palms. A factory reject. Sometimes I feel as if I'm just one big shortcoming. Lately, I've been dreaming of lectures at university with liberating content, wild dancing, and thought-provoking performances. I'd like to reach the centre of my being and bite into its core.

In a world where an increasing number of people are declaring themselves non-binary, I still long for unencumbered femininity. I don't want to be in-between, although I've tried to tell myself I do. In fact, I want to take on typically gendered and biological female roles. Maybe I would like

to give birth to a child, without all my convoluted past. I overflow with psychosis and I succumb to violent emotions. It frightens me a little that people like me will end up in the dustbin of history because everything is becoming more and more relative, while we focus on surgery and skirt a bit the trend of accepting our bodies as they are. For example, nowadays, the term “born in a male body” is considered wrong. I don’t agree with that. I consider myself born in the wrong body. There were times when I wanted to scrape my skin off. Today, I accept my body, but I miss the fact that it won’t ever be biologically feminine to its full extent. I think on the whole I’m quite a difficult person and it’d be tough for someone to put up with me. So I’m alone. By choice, or maybe that is indeed my destiny. It’s painful, but I don’t think I can do otherwise anymore. I live mainly for my mum, to give her encouragement, not to die before her, to take care of her. Sometimes we’re very happy. We like each other. And from inside this loneliness, I send warm greetings to You.



LUCJUSZ TYBERIUSZ OLSZEWSKI [Born in the year 2000, trans man. Born and raised in a small town in the Kujawy-Pomerania Province, moved to the Greater Poland Province two years ago for studies.]

21

About a Boy Who Doesn't Exist

I could never tell if my life's been good or bad. I could never say if I actually liked it or not. As a matter of fact, it always felt like it was someone else's. It seemed to belong to the society that brought me into this world and long saddled me with incomprehensible demands and expectations. Well, it's really quite hard not to give in to its influence. Yet I was still irritated that I had to do this, wear that, dream of things ascribed to girls, chicks, women—all because twenty years ago someone decided I am and will always be one. That's probably why it felt like this life wasn't mine; whichever way you cut it, the person writing this text formally doesn't exist. You won't find me in any documents and I don't know if my name will ever grace any. What I am is more like a notion, an unwritten contract between myself and my friends. We agreed that I am. I made no such deal with anybody else, so they don't see me. They only see what they like to see. Generally speaking, I'm not holding that against them—I never made a point of explaining it all to people I basically had no contact with, anyway. It seemed a waste of time to explain to passers-by, waiters, cashiers, that inside the female body they were speaking to hid (presumably unexpectedly) another—I'm not even sure if male or not. Maybe I've been living like this long enough to grow numb, or maybe I thought about it too little, or maybe too much. I'm a sceptic who won't take anything for granted—even my own gender.

I remember my own childhood as a happy time. It wasn't perfect—I can't even imagine what it would have had to be like for me to call it that. Anyway, the memories that I have of it are mostly good. Maybe I jettisoned the less pleasant ones to avoid lugging the ballast later on. I think there's a general tendency to mainly remember the nice things. The more depressing ones prove no less significant, though, but those I'd rather deal with later.

My family home is on the outskirts of a small town. Actually, that's where I still live. Adjoining it is a large courtyard and a tiny orchard, there's also a handful of farm buildings. Not bad if you're looking for a space for

everyday child's play. I grew up slowly in this world, living with my parents and grandparents. It seems I was well cared for; my grandfather and mother were particularly involved in making sure I wasn't bored. Besides, I very quickly learned to keep myself busy—I liked to draw, paint, do puzzles, assemble bricks, or play with my teddy bears. As an only child, I had the benefit of undivided attention.

I was probably affected by the fact that I had only limited contact with my peers, but it's not like it bothered me much. I did not seek out children my age. I was rather quiet and preferred individual tasks to group play. That didn't worry anyone when I was four or five, but afterwards some would begin to see it as an issue, even if it didn't affect my mood in the least.

Transgender people are often asked what toys they liked to play with as children or how they acted. My gender wasn't a particularly hot topic at the time. I had nothing against being made to wear dresses—the idea of gender-appropriate clothing didn't bother me much. I liked to rummage through my grandmother's wardrobe and play with her handbags, of which she had plenty. People bought me dolls too. It would be a lie if I said I liked to play with them, my time being equally occupied by the toy cars or toy soldiers I inherited from my cousins. To a sexologist, I would probably say I wore out their clothes; I would also be likely to keep all the girly aspects of my early childhood to myself for fear they would adversely affect a potential diagnosis. It's best to fit in with the accepted model of one who identifies with the other gender if you want to be heard. Otherwise your path might be riddled with obstacles simply because you didn't reject outright everything that's connected with femininity or masculinity. As a kid, I had no time for things like these, even if the differences between women and men were obvious to me. Well, I didn't really have to adapt to any generally accepted patterns and norms at that stage, or find a way out of them. These were the good days before adolescence, before I was swallowed whole by the society I could never really find my place in.

Childhood for me was the time when some of my future interests took shape. My mum read me books; I also learned to read pretty quickly. Today, literature is my passion: I literally swallow books and magazines and also write stories or novellas of my own. The written word became the primary means for me to share my thoughts with other people and make sense of them. Paper doesn't judge; it doesn't ask questions; so I also sometimes try to express myself through drawings. Today, I feel like I would not exist if it wasn't for the virtual pages I filled with my writings thanks to a computer keyboard. That's also how someone who reads this can have a chance to get to know me a little. If you think about it, it's a peculiar kind

of one-sided acquaintance. Well, if things were normal, I could say it's nice to meet you. As things are, I can only express the hope that you will find it nice to meet me. My nearest and dearest call me Lucjusz.

You better get used to me because there's a good fifteen years left to summarise!

Clearly, the first day of school was a watershed for me every time, but I can't say I have fond memories of any of them. My first day in preschool, or kindergarten—whichever you prefer—figures as a shock. For reasons unknown to me, everyone was being loud. I felt the place was all chaos, in contrast to my home, where everything had its place and pace. I really didn't want to go back the following day, but, as it turned out, there was no alternative. Actually, I'm not sure I ever grew to like going to school, even though learning is among my favourite activities—perhaps even a way of life.

Nevertheless, the fact that I spent several dozen hours every week at school meant it became a major part of my life, whether I liked it or not. For this reason, I allowed myself to group my memories into periods associated with subsequent stages in my education. I don't recall too many potentially game-changing events from the first years of primary school, but since I've already decided to share my experiences with you I'll try to think of as many as I can. Maybe this would help me discover how my identity took shape—I'm yet to piece together a clear picture of that myself. After all, these aren't things one consciously records, and they don't change all of a sudden, but slowly and gradually.

I wish to stress that I don't think I was overprotected. I came in contact with various people: cousins, aunts and uncles, and more distant relatives; friends of my parents and their children. I think I coped well with them, and yet I felt completely estranged from my peers at school for the longest time. Eventually, I managed to befriend others, but to this day I feel I kept myself to myself. That was my survival tactic and little has changed to date in that regard.

I played with everyone, regardless of gender, until a change in the air told me girls had better play with other girls, particularly with dolls and other things like that. It wasn't something I particularly enjoyed, so I took to using my play time for drawing: on a piece of paper, it didn't really matter if Mum wore pants or skirts. I wasn't really a fan of the latter, they seemed weirdly impractical—much like tights, which consistently ran on me.

The primary school I attended only had one class per year, so I spent seven years in largely the same group. I managed to befriend someone in

the first grade—a girl from my cohort. She lived nearby. It all began when the class teacher sat us together one day. A good way to start a friendship at school, that's how I see it.

I believe I tried to be more girly at the time, just to make her like me more. Still, when we played together, I usually assumed masculine roles. Looking back now, I can't really say why I did that; at the time, it seemed very natural. She must have thought so, too, because she never expressed any disapproval of it. We soon grew very fond of one another and spent a lot of time together, but she had to move and change school, so our relationship gradually died out. That really hurt, and I would struggle with forming closer relationships afterwards. Today, this childhood drama seems very distant, but there was a time when I felt it hanging above my head every day.

Things went pretty smoothly up until the third grade, even though I felt like we kept going over the same material every year. At the time, I had no real interest in what went on beyond my own back yard. Politics and all that it entailed were somewhere beyond the bounds of my conscience. In those days, I thought that if there was something that could hurt me in the future, someone would give me a heads-up; sadly, as it turned out, no one cared to enlighten me in that regard. I was more worried about the bullies that harassed me during breaks.

Some stuff about LGBT people began to crop up on TV, but I didn't really care about it in those days. I didn't feel like that was me, but I also didn't feel particularly different from them. I hadn't felt discriminated against yet; there was no need for me to fight for my rights. Still, I think that when I was younger there was no hate campaign (at least not to the degree there is now) against people of other sexual orientations in the media. Though I was mostly preoccupied with kid's TV, a few bits and bobs from other sources stuck in my head.

It seemed peculiar to me that I remembered the scene where Hilary Swank, playing Brandon Teena, watches her own body in a mirror. At the time, I didn't understand why anyone would bind their breasts. It took me ages to identify the film the scene was from—long enough for me to take to hiding my own imperfections (as I thought of them back then) under layers of clothing before I finally found the title on the Web.

I don't know if it's because of my later experiences or a subconscious recognition that it was somehow pertinent, but this particular film my mother once watched on TV became fixed in my head as a useful memory from childhood. I also remember starting to watch a documentary about a transgender person, before my father decided it was silly and took the

remote from me. A pity, because for some reason I did find it completely captivating. Not because a woman becoming a man was so unusual, but because it could have helped me understand why someone might want that to happen and how it might feel. After all, grown-ups don't do anything without a reason—at least that's how they seemed to me.

As a child, I think I reacted with equanimity to pretty much anything that was thrown at me. No prejudice stuck with me, even though I was raised in a fairly backward Catholic home. At the time, I still had little interest in sexuality, so maybe I couldn't quite understand how it might provide a basis for any division or a cause for disrespecting anyone. Perhaps it's unsurprising to hear that I learned about sex and the various potential sexual orientations at school. It wasn't in-class learning, though—my schoolmates were my teachers. Somehow, I avoided learning their prejudices though, in spite of the popularity of slogans along the lines of "faggots eat maggots."

I soaked it all up like a sponge—you could call me a blank page—but what truly stuck with me was information filtered through my child brain. There's all kinds of people; I was different from the rest of my class, so maybe that's why some laughed at me. Others were also laughed at when they didn't look like the ones who did the laughing. I didn't feel like joining in the laughter. I don't know what their homes were like, but I still felt accepted as a person at the time, even if it often felt like there was something that set me apart from the rest of my own family, something I couldn't quite pin down yet.

When my erstwhile best friend moved away, I continued to spend most of my time with the girls. There weren't many boys in our class and they often harassed me, which made me sad. Early on, I was marked out as a diligent student, which was not to everyone's liking. But that doesn't mean I didn't spend any time at all with boys—I simply met with my two male friends after school. As long as we were inside, we acted like we knew nothing about one another, even though we sat at neighbouring benches. I didn't really understand this behaviour—it just felt like something we had to do. Besides, I preferred to focus on learning, since the fourth grade actually introduced some stuff that interested me and I found pleasure in studying it.

Learning wasn't all that I did. I loved to knit and do all the other things creative kids do. However, it was reading that took pride of place among my interests. Sometimes it seems to me that I really jumped from one book to another as a child. Reading didn't feel like a way to escape reality—it

was just an enjoyable pastime for an only child, and besides, no one complained about it the way they did if I watched too many cartoons on TV.

Maybe that was when I began to identify with the masculine protagonists of books, but that's hard to say. I don't really remember, I couldn't really point to any specific example, and besides, I think that—as much as I want to avoid generalising—characters from books intended for people that age tend not to have a very complex internal life. Anyway, my tendency to identify with protagonists of the opposite sex quickly found an outlet in anime and manga. I was amazed by the variety of the characters and storylines there, and even if the idea of trading places with any of them was not—and still isn't—appealing, I found traits in them that, while not quite attractive, seemed desirable to possess, appropriate for myself.

I suppose everyone remembers hearing "Girls don't act like this" or "Leave it, it's for boys," or something to that effect. I became the object of similar manoeuvres, too. I'm not sure if the grown-ups around me actually managed to teach me how to sit when you have a vagina—or how to dress when you have one, how to walk, how to speak, etc. Umpteen years later, my physiology isn't all that different, but I'm completely impervious to comments like that. I think I may have been more susceptible back then—I was probably more affected by criticism and wanted to be liked by everyone. It's a pity I had not yet learned the skill of laughing heartily at such admonitions; perhaps my relatives would have learned more quickly how little I cared about their opinion.

I didn't make any particular effort to act like a boy; it's more like I did what felt normal to me. I walked a bit like my father; I inherited his facial expressions and stick-figure posture. It's not like I tried to emulate him, so that can't be why I adopted these mannerisms. When I was younger we spent more time together. Actually, I suppose he really tried to make a fine daughter out of me, and I don't think he expected the end product to turn out like this. When my mum worked late, he combed my long hair into a ponytail or buns and dispatched me to school. It isn't something I can't stop thinking about, but I'd like to experience moments like this again.

My masculine identity began to germinate in earnest with the arrival of my second meaningful relationship. During fifth grade, a girl from the city moved into our town, together with her sister and parents. We were very different, but I decided to befriend her, knowing that my connections with other people in my class had begun to deteriorate. It was good to try, or so I tried to make myself think. Her mother didn't like me—for whatever reason, the parents of my friends never did. It's not like I was rude to them or anything like that. Though my new friend's mother didn't enjoy

it, she and I took to spending afternoons together. When we played, I began to take on masculine roles again, and since my friend and her sister did likewise, it didn't feel so unusual. I can't recall where the game came from, but I called the character I played David. These pretend-names soon became disposable, as much as we all grow out of such games; but they allowed me to somehow adapt to using male pronouns. It may have been weird at the outset, but soon it was easy. A while later, I would completely abandon female forms and all the rest. It's funny how it took the longest time for people to notice. Even those closest to me seemed completely oblivious to the fact that I'd begun to speak about myself in masculine forms. I couldn't tell if they just didn't listen to what I said, or whether they simply didn't want to see how far I'd strayed from their idea of the world.

However dissonant our communication was, I really tried to keep this new relationship alive. After all, there was practically no one else my age at the time who lived close by and wanted to spend time with me. It was only when I left for summer camp that I met nice people my own age.

The camp was a reward for good grades after the final year of primary school. It lasted ten days and was a real torment, as far as I was concerned. I'll never look at a beach the same way. Of course, I was assigned to a girls' room, what else. I actually don't know who thought it smart to pack seven people into a handful of square metres, but I saw for myself that it wasn't. Maybe the lack of personal space hurt me so much because I was an only child, but I did what I could to adjust to the conditions. The girls I met there went to school in another town in our commune and we managed to have a good time together. We even managed to stay in touch for a while afterwards.

They accepted my interests—the fact that I read a lot and listened to music they found weird. They liked me and my gentle barbs. And yet I did not tell them I felt I was a boy, because that could have made them feel awkward about sharing a room with me. I let them treat me like a girl; I even let them braid my hair, even though I normally only allowed my mum to do that.

I really liked them, but when I finally returned home, to my own room, I breathed a sigh of relief that I no longer had to pretend I was someone who didn't feel like me. At least, that's how it was for some two months until the new school year arrived.

Going to middle school was an overpowering experience for me, though I couldn't really say why. After all, my middle school was within the same commune and all the people I knew from primary school went there.

Maybe it's because it would have been easier to melt into a crowd of completely unknown faces, where no one knew much at all about me. My old classmates, who used to harass me, could go on taunting me about all my missteps and call me out as a nerd. There were plenty of new people my age too, but somehow I couldn't find a place for myself among them. They all seemed so strange and unlike me, and I eventually kind of gave up.

Early adolescence was a seriously trying time for me. Growing up is never easy. You're dizzy in the head all the time; it can be hard to contain the emotions; the body changes; and so on, and so forth. The problems I faced were in part the same as everybody else's, but I also had some entirely non-standard ones. My parents were going through divorce; I was stressed out by school and could often be exhausted on account of it; I tried to fit in with the others to no avail; and I was also beaten down by loneliness—something many teenagers experience. But if you add in problems with a body that changes in an unwanted direction and can't be stopped, the fear of being yourself and of your own uncertain future, the lack of understanding among grown-ups and peers—it's an almost unbearable mix.

But if I'm to dissect it properly, I need to start at the beginning.

Once I found the right name for the thing that was happening to me, I began to worry a lot. I learned about transsexuality on the Internet, no one could explain it to me any better. I was relieved that I wasn't alone in feeling that the body I got was not the right one. But when I read what I had to do to adjust my body to how I felt about myself, I was terrified. Not by the invasive nature of the procedures, but by the amount of stress one had to bear along the way—as if gender dysphoria wasn't enough to completely wreck your mood. Doctor's appointments, examinations, court dates, surgeries—I couldn't wrap my head around it all back then, and I still can't today. It all seemed just terrifying and way too complex, as if designed to dissuade anyone from breaking out of the stiff social framework of gender. And then, there was the exorbitant cost of it all. Back then, I imagined all of the people I knew setting their lives in order, making families, finding their own place—and there I was, fighting to be myself. It was a terribly hopeless vision that I couldn't share with anyone because, technically, I had still not told anyone that my biological sex wasn't for me.

Because I struggled to find a place for myself at school, I became active on the Internet. I had just begun writing short stories and I thought I could follow the example of others by creating a blog for sharing them. I filled in my personal data as a male, so confident I was that no one would verify them. I really felt I created a space—a teeny-tiny bit of the Internet—for me to be myself. It didn't matter what my papers said, how I looked,

what my voice sounded like. I became someone who was more real than the girl I was taken for, even though he didn't exist. This helped me form a few relationships, one of which continues to this day and matters more to me than any other.

It didn't feel to me like I was lying to the boy I befriended because he commented on one of my stories. I introduced myself to him with a male name and used male pronouns, and he just went along with it. Why can't people you meet in real life act like this? Does it really matter so much that the person you're talking to prefers masculine forms while looking like a girl? I was a teen, I couldn't make myself into a handsome beardy guy even if I wanted to. Afterwards, I told my friend I was actually a transgender person and he, wanting to show understanding, asked me if he should refer to me by the female name of my choice. This turn of events seemed funny to me and I obviously explained how things stood. Nevertheless, our relationship didn't change—each of us had his own problems and tried to show support to the other in spite of the physical distance and so forth. Being trans is important to me, but it isn't what my life revolves around and doesn't define me one hundred percent. The older I get the less my sex matters to me, while my interests press on further and further towards centre stage. Still, it's precisely that one feature that would wreak substantial havoc in my private life, as if everything else paled in comparison in the eyes of other people.

After a while, however, I decided to tell my mum what I felt was going on. Sadly, this isn't a favourite memory for me, but I don't blame her. She was just worried and became nervous. She said I must have been led on by something I read on the Internet, and besides, I would never become a real man since I won't ever conceive a child (nor did I plan to get pregnant—would that mean I was a fake woman?). She would long search for any possible mistakes she could have made while bringing me up, so there was a fair bit of tension between us at the time. I really felt awful back then: not only did my breasts start to grow, which made me increasingly desperate, but I also couldn't rely on the support of someone so close to me. As time went by, Mum eventually swallowed the news. It would take her a few more years to adjust to it, though, but I'm glad she didn't give up. She understood that her child was no longer what they used to be and that no one was to blame for it. However, when she agreed for us to visit a psychologist to talk things over, she was told it was all her fault for not having worn dresses or skirts and not using make-up, thus failing to set the right example. The theory seemed wafer-thin to me—it's not like my mum was the only woman I ever met in my life—but, as could be expected,

my arguments didn't matter and she took to blaming herself again. I did my best to discuss it with her, and today, even though she still sometimes refers to me by my female name, I feel that she accepts me and my choices and helps me any way she can to stake my own path. We had good and bad days, but we lived through them. I think some parents don't have that motivation and end up pushing their children further and further away. It's just a loose digression, a meek supposition, because I know nothing about raising children and don't want to come across as smug—but I think there's something to it.

Mum wasn't the only person I came out of the closet to while in middle school. However, there was one moment when I felt pressured to do it, and I paid the price for that afterwards.

My class teacher—an elderly woman with a potentially conservative outlook who taught us Polish grammar and literature—decided to hold an exhibition of my artworks. I allowed myself to be drawn into the idea even though I'm loath to show off my abilities, achievements, or anything of that sort. Back then, I had a sizeable collection of drawings, so there was a lot to choose from. I was tasked with writing a bit about myself to accompany the pieces, and so I did. I wrote it so that no word in the text indicated the gender of the writer—I already had skills in writing like this—but I couldn't avoid one pitfall. I called myself an *autor* (author), in the masculine, and the teacher seemed to be making a point by correcting it to *autorka*, in the feminine. I remember the feeling that came over me when I saw the correction, but I couldn't describe it. It was a mixture of anger, disappointment, and regret. I felt like crying; it seemed like just a single word, but to me, it was like being forced into a frame, my drawings ascribed to some girl I never was.

My class teacher didn't see why I would feel the need to express disapproval (to put it mildly) at the correction, so I told her I did not feel I was a woman, but a man, and that it mattered to me that I was referred to in the masculine in this particular instance. She replied that I couldn't possibly feel I was a man since I was wearing my hair long. The text was left as it was, and she wouldn't leave me be until the end of school.

The fact that she brought up my hair irked me, so I cut it. I came to the first day of school with my hair dyed blue, which also wasn't to the liking of the teacher. The school rules said the student's dress and hairstyle had to conform to the social norms, which was imprecise enough for me to assume my blue hair didn't hurt anyone's feelings and I could dye away. I was then told it would distract others in class. Excuse me, but you have to have some serious issues with concentration if my hair is enough to

put you off the whole time you're in class. I went to the hairdresser and then all that was left of the long blue hair was the braid I kept as a souvenir, which I still keep in the cupboard. That was around the time I turned fifteen—before then I was a bit apprehensive about cutting my hair, but I eventually decided that if people were going to use it to question the way I felt about my own gender, it was better to be rid of it. So what if long-haired men have existed since time immemorial—when you claimed to be a trans male, people demanded you subscribe to an ideal masculinity as much as possible; otherwise, they simply said you were making things up. I still think it's hurtful, but I did not yet have the inner strength to resist the paradigm of a "true trans," even if I didn't like the way he looked.

As already mentioned, I knew no peace until the end of school. It didn't matter that I got the best grades, that I engaged in artistic activities, that I participated in various competitions—my class teacher didn't like it that I wasn't acting like the other teenagers and she would repeatedly discuss this imagined problem with my mum. In school, I acted as I thought one should—I was there to receive instruction, and that is what I did. At home, I became someone else entirely, someone who liked to joke around and was open to others, because I felt welcome—as opposed to the place where I was being chastised. My class teacher didn't like the books I read (who knows, maybe she though middle-schoolers should read *Winnie the Pooh* instead of crime novels?) or even the shirts I wore. But she really outdid herself when she told me to perform at a function on Teacher's Day in a skirt. Teeth on edge, I did what was asked of me, but then almost broke down in tears in the bathroom. To avoid using the girls' room, I sometimes sneaked into the primary school building to use the boys' room there. As I see it now, I could have done without that, but back then these little things helped me keep my head up, at least until I was pressed into some heteronormative frame again. Why didn't anyone even notice how tight they were?

At school, I also endured a few unpleasant situations involving lack of understanding toward trans people. I remember one time, the girls were changing for a PE class in the dressing room, and of course I was there too. I won't even talk about PE classes because I simply hated them, my gender identity had little to do with it. Anyway, one of the girls who was in the same class as me in primary school and middle school said she'd seen some talk-show along the lines of *Rozmowy w toku*,[1] where one of the guests was a trans boy. So she'd decided to start wearing men's clothes

1 *Rozmowy w toku*—see n. 4 on p. 332.

to attract attention. This hurt me a lot because I had been wearing men's clothes for ages and no one cared to notice and consider that my gender identity might not be what they thought it was. Maybe it's because I didn't crave the attention?

Every trip outside of the closet—every instance of sharing with others that I deviated in some way from the heteronorm—came at a substantial price. I said so to my girlfriends from primary school, but their responses were either vehement or nonchalant, so I pretty much stopped talking about it for a while.

The fact that a lot of bad stuff was going on with regards to me being transgender doesn't mean nothing good happened to me. I was sometimes told I looked like a boy, which mattered a lot to me at the time. The friend I made through my short story blog supported me all the way and I think that, if it wasn't for him, I would have folded like a house of cards. I could still express myself as a man through my short stories—I even went so far as to describe the feelings associated with being a transgender person in my writings. In those days, I waited impatiently to turn eighteen, at which point I would be able to take steps toward changing my personal data, my outward appearance and the like. The idea seemed very exciting. I often wondered if my facial features would change, if I would grow at least a little once the hormonal treatment began, if I would be handsome. I still think about that, but now that I'm twenty, I find I'm in no hurry to take up hormones—but that's something for later, it's a topic that has always caused a stir among my friends.

In spite of my tendency to keep myself to myself, I was a bit of a contrarian. As already mentioned, I didn't like being denied things for no reason or being forced to adjust to everybody else. There was a time during middle school when I began to write my name on tests with an "a" dotted like an "i" at the end.[2] Obviously, my surname indicated my gender, but this hybrid letter became the means by which I recognised that I was somewhere between a woman and a man and that I had no reason to be ashamed of that. A lot of the teachers noticed it, as I would learn later on, but no one made any comments. It wasn't until the end of third grade that I learned the matter had become a topic in the teachers' room, and that came from the catechist who decided to talk with me. I generally don't get along well with people who manifest their faith, as indicated by my relationship with our class teacher, but I respected the

2 Typical Polish surnames end with an "a" for females and an "i" for males (Kowalska—Kowalski; Znaniecka—Znaniecki).

catechist. I still attended religion classes, which I would no longer do in high school. The teacher showed respect for different opinions and never hurt anybody's feelings on purpose. We spoke frankly for a short time after school and he told me I would be a worthy person in his eyes whatever I chose to be in the future and however things might turn out for me. It was nice to hear something like that, and I even regret a little that I don't have the chance to tell him about everything that's happened to me in the years since then.

I came to the end-of-year ceremony with my hair cropped, dyed blue again, and in a suit. As I said, it's in my blood to be a contrarian, but I loved to see the face my class teacher made—she wanted very much to give me another lecture, but couldn't. I collected my diploma and took it the very same day to the high school I sought admission to. I hoped the people there would be more mature and that it would just be better, but early on it was hard.

I always came back from summer vacations well-rested. I mostly spent them at home, rarely venturing beyond my courtyard, so it was a break in contact with other people. I didn't have to listen to shopkeepers calling me "miss" or see others looking at me funny because I dressed differently from other teenagers, or nod in agreement while listening to teachers who tried with all their might to have me adjust to the rest of the group. I was able to find peace in this time, time I spent at home reading books, writing short stories, or drawing. I knew I would revert to being a nervous wreck during the school year, so I soaked in as much of the peace and quiet as I could.

I worried about what high school was going to be like. The change evoked mixed emotions in me—a lot of anxiety, but also hope. I was hoping to find open-minded and serious people in my class, to be understood, but I knew sixteen-year-olds could still act like children. I wanted to show more self-assurance toward others and I knew it would cost me a lot of effort. At the time, I couldn't imagine welcoming anyone with a firm handshake, boldly proclaiming my chosen name. I only saw it in daydreams; it's very different today.

Before the school year began, I befriended one of my future classmates—we were to spend three years together in the biology/chemistry class. I told her about me being trans because I'd taken to writing in the masculine out of habit, and ended up doing so with her. However hard I tried to use female pronouns for myself, it always came out fake—as if I was pretending to be someone else and not being very good at it. She took it

in practically without a hitch, but things would not go so smoothly after that, in spite of the promising beginnings.

I came to the opening day in a suit. As I would learn afterwards from gossip, my attempt at passing went very well, earning me a brief moment in the sun. Everybody thought I was a boy until my new class teacher started distributing ID cards. Inevitably, she read out the data from my papers, and the magic was undone.

The following day, we were already out for a team building trip. Personally, I don't find things like that much fun because it's the last thing that could make me team up with anyone. However, I did manage to talk with a few interesting people, which somehow left me at the end of the day surrounded by people from the arts and humanities class rather than my own. Maybe it was all for the best—I would later learn that some of the girls had already concocted multiple theories about me. To this day, my favourite among them is the claim: "If she's talking about herself in the masculine, she must be a lesbian." I'm yet to unscramble the logic there. But I didn't see any of the things that were being said as a signal that I wasn't welcome.

I fell in love a few times—I hear that's what people tend to do. Before high school, it was all just meek and aimless fascination. In high school, I actually began to date someone—namely, a girl I met during the team building trip. I was charmed by her original looks and a natural confidence that I lacked. I wouldn't say there was any hope for our relationship—I sometimes thought I may have been just a stand-in for a friend she used to have at another high school who had rejected her. It took us a while to become close, but I believed it made sense.

I really liked having someone to look for in the school corridors; and it was nice to go out together to a café. To hold hands with and embrace another person made you feel like you weren't entirely alone. Actually, kissing was also nice. All these things made others think about me as a lesbian all the more, but I didn't care and never tried to dispel these rumours—people tend to see what they want to see and correcting everyone else's misconceptions takes way too much time.

I never thought of my sexuality in terms of heterosexuality or homosexuality, just like I stopped looking at my gender through the lens of masculinity or femininity. I never excluded the possibility of falling in love with a man, a woman, a transgender person, or a person who doesn't subscribe to any particular gender. Perhaps people only fall in love with the unlikeliest of mates in movies, but I believed that what seems unbelievable doesn't have to be impossible.

My first relationship didn't last long. I took the blame for our separation because I thought I was falling short of expectations. I found it difficult to show emotions—a trait inherited from my father—which my girlfriend didn't like. I told myself it was all for the best since I could only make her unhappy; after all, a relationship with a transgender person generates problems other couples often won't have. It was a long time before I allowed myself to fall in love again.

I found my own place in my class. As always, I mostly kept company with the girls, but fairly soon I asked one of them to call me by my male name because I just hated my female one. She had no issues with that and was even happy to have me explain it to her. After a while the other girls also began to refer to me in the masculine, so there wasn't really much more I could ask for. I still maintain good relations with a few of my high school friends, even though each of us went their own way as far as later education was concerned.

School wasn't the only place where I found good company. During the summer vacations, I asked to be admitted to the meetings of an LGBT group, a space for gaining support, talking things over, sharing a cup of tea, and even going somewhere together. Before then, I couldn't even dream of anything like that because there was no way I would be able to regularly visit the city. However, once the group became active in October, I began to take part in its meetings regularly. For me, it was an opportunity to open up and share my problems with others without risking censure. Once every two weeks, I felt like I was visiting a family of my own choosing. It was my first chance to meet another transgender person face to face—thus far, I had only talked with one through chats or forums. We quickly became fast friends; we had shared interests and did crazy things together.

Even though my high school years weren't perfect, that was when a lot of stuff began to change for the better. I was happy to join a class where no one laughed at me, in spite of my untypical attitude. It was soothing to find other people who shared the same problems members of minorities faced. Walking through the old town every day, I enjoyed the hubbub of the city, the colourful windows of the stores, and the seasonal decorations. Yet, everything was still in front of me, for the years that followed would prove to be unusually abundant in major events.

Once my first serious relationship dissolved, I gave up on any love affairs. My time was filled by learning, but also by active participation in events involving the LGBT community. I took part in Pride Parades in various cities, in discussions, discos, and the like. At times, I acted as a quiet éminence grise because I knew some of the people who organised these

events and helped them in various ways. At the time, I strove to improve my self-confidence. The fact that the teachers tried to impose their dogmas on me didn't affect me—I found acceptance among friends of different ages and from different backgrounds and I felt at home in my own body, as imperfect as it seemed to me. When there's nothing to worry about, you sometimes give in to fascination, and you're then reminded that there's nothing else in the world that can cause as much havoc.

The story I'm about to tell is really my favourite anecdote—a proof that the universe is evidently teasing me by showering me with ironic events and coincidences. Perhaps everyone feels that way sometimes, but destiny seemed to be out to get me. Back to the matter at hand, though...

It all began even before high school. I was going to the city to take an ID photo. I had been in some deep funk the previous evening and cried until late, which means I look nothing like myself on my school ID card and it appears I'm suffering from some eye disease. But there was something that saved the day for me: as I crossed one of the major streets in the city, a handsome boy went by and sent me a gloriously disarming smile. At least, that's how I remembered it. He had caught my eye before, at the bus station—long black hair, dark clothes, glasses with big rims. He wasn't easy to miss.

When the school year began, I told my girlfriends about the boy. It turned out they had seen him, too, and one had even occasionally shared the same bus with him. We all agreed that he had extraordinary looks. None of us knew what his name was, so one of my friends gave him a placeholder name—Dominik, because he reminded her of the protagonist of the film *Suicide Room*.[3] Whenever either of us noticed him in the city, she mentioned it to the others. None of us, however, saw any possibility of ever getting to know him any better. It was only the following year that I learned he attended a high school overlooking the Vistula river. It all began with one of my readers—she went to the same school and recognised him from my description. She occasionally told me about him, but it's not like she had any particular relationship with him.

It wasn't supposed to happen, and yet our paths crossed. I went to a McDonald's with a friend and began to describe the charming boy I've been seeing at the bus station. He nodded with understanding while slowly eating his ice cream. While I expanded on how smitten I was with the boy,

3 *Sala samobójców* (*Suicide Room*, 2011, dir. Jan Komasa) is a psychological drama about a teenager who, when shunned by his peers—who laugh at him and berate him as a supposed homosexual—locks himself at home and gradually drifts into the virtual world.

my subject appeared on our floor and took a seat a few tables away from us with a friend. I became excited, like a little girl, and I lost my mind completely when my friend told me he knew the boy from work and could introduce me to him. I panicked and said it wasn't a good idea—I would simply melt if I got to see him up close. But I eventually gave in and let my friend introduce us.

The boy attended open sessions of a manga and anime fan club. As I said hello and introduced myself to him, it seemed like the time stopped, and so did my heart and breath. I expected I was looking at him with goo-goo eyes. For everyone who saw us, it may well have looked like a scene from a movie, and only the dimmest imbecile would not have seen what I felt for that boy. I took to attending the meetings every week just to be able to sit in the same room as he did. We played games together and talked. Others were nice to me, too, but I only craved his attention. I walked him to the bus station; I sometimes waited for him after school—anything to get at least five minutes of conversation with him. I remember I always felt butterflies in my stomach whenever I saw him in the crowd and when writing messages to him. It was the first time I felt like that, so I thought it meant something.

Every moment I got to spend with him brought me immense joy. Still, I would sometimes cry into my pillow because I knew we would never be more than friends. I knew he liked men, but I never thought he would look at me in that way. Whenever he did a double take on a tall, cis man, I pretended not to notice, even though it hurt me deeply. On the one hand, I wanted to be selfish just once in my life and take him for myself; on the other, I knew well enough that it could never happen. Looking back, I take an ironic view of this fascination because it seems disarmingly childish, and yet, I'm completely at a loss to decipher what I was thinking then, even though it wasn't all that long ago.

We went for a hot chocolate once. Although it happened on Valentine's Day, it was by no means a date. It wasn't particularly cold for mid-February. Perhaps I gave in to the ever-present heart-shaped decorations, but I knew he did not. Still, we had a good time, or at least that's how I see it. We had plenty of time for one another, so we talked about ourselves, about school, about our families and so on. We walked along the Vistula and stopped at a playground. We spent a while there, embracing gently on a swing. I think I deluded myself that something might click between us. After all, we had a few common interests, a similar sense of humour, maybe even similar attitudes. I don't know; I probably idealised everything about him, so my opinions should be taken with a grain of salt.

Two months later, I was already at the end of my tether emotionally and could no longer deal with my feelings for him. During a longer break from school I snapped and told him I loved him, and made it clear that I knew very well he did not reciprocate. He didn't deny it. I was certain he would abandon me, but in moments like this I think everyone hopes things will turn out differently. I didn't blame him for not seeing me as a potential partner, but he hurt me by saying he would probably make jokes about my feelings for him. This really broke me. I cried and wracked my brains for ways of disappearing from the face of the earth. Some of my friends began to worry that I might hurt myself. I would be lying if I said it didn't cross my mind.

My best friend, the one I had a long-distance relationship with, offered to visit me and try to raise my spirits. Although we'd known one another for three years already, we only saw each other twice at conventions, so I couldn't see why he would feel so compelled to come. Maybe he was inspired by the fact that he had become smitten with someone himself earlier in the year, only to learn afterwards that the person in question was not worthy of his feelings. My mum agreed to have him at our place, so as I waited for him to cross half the country to see me, the hope in me grew that his presence might turn my thoughts away from recent events.

I collected him from the train station on a balmy day in May. We walked across the bridge and wandered around the old town. He insisted we go to a small café that served Oreo lattes; I agreed, even though it was the same place where I'd had the hot chocolate with the boy who rejected my feelings. My friend even took the exact same seat that he did.

He was much different from how I remembered him—taller and more mature. His voice had changed. He had begun to smoke cigarettes. He'd also gained more self-assurance. I remembered how reticent he'd been when we first talked. As we sat at the table, waiting for our orders, I took him by the hand. I think I did it reflexively, just to occupy myself. It wasn't until a few years later that I learned how much this moment meant for him, even though I barely remembered it.

We spent a cosy evening together, capped with a shared bottle of wine. I was utterly blissful. I completely forgot about the boy I'd been pursuing for months; I no longer felt shame or regret because of it. It seemed that everything was okay when I lay my head in my best friend's lap and he gently caressed me with his large, warm hand.

I didn't think there could be anything more between us that evening. My best friend was gay, too, and as far as I knew, he was never attracted to me. I didn't consciously try to change that in any way, so I didn't expect

him to embrace me warmly that evening and make me feel wanted. It was a hugely important day for me because it made me realise that my body really didn't matter if there was someone who found my personality, temperament, and attitude charming. Up to that point, I thought I could stake my path through life on my own. To realise I needed someone to support me was a turning point. No one had accepted me the way he did, so I quickly fell head over heels for him. We stayed in a long-distance relationship for a while, but with time it began to weigh on us. We were both on shaky ground mentally; I demanded more involvement from him and he was too afraid to give in, so the tension between us kept rising. In the end we practically broke up, though I didn't stop loving him. Although I would blame him for making me feel rejected and unwanted again, I continued to wait patiently for things to settle and for us to come back together. Many thought I was naive, that I was pursuing the impossible, but I believed he cared for me—after all, it's not as if you can fake it like that for months, can you?

I threw myself into my interests, as I always did whenever I couldn't bear the pent-up emotions and was at a loss over what to do. My experiences provided the thread for the stories I weaved. This made them at times very personal, my issues becoming the problems faced by the protagonists. That was how I could deal with them; as a result, my stories and novellas featured not only transgender characters, but also characters left to their own devices, hopelessly in love, unable to accept their past. The key role in my stories was usually played by feelings. My readers claimed I showed great skill in describing them. That's what I always strove for, since what use is action if the characters don't react? It's just form without content.

As complex as my relationship with my best friend had become, we still went to his prom as a couple. I decided to skip mine because I didn't believe I could enjoy myself there, but I really wanted to join him at an event like this—so I insisted; he made his decision only very late. I even got a new, light-grey suit for the occasion. I looked insanely good in it, just like he did in his navy blue one. I was happy for the opportunity to be with him at this kind of event. We weren't known to show our mutual feelings in public even when we were an item, but I felt that everyone knew we came there together. No one looked at us strangely—there were two other boys at our table who also came as a couple, and a girl with her boyfriend who was another trans. It was just that kind of class.

In spite of all my efforts, the gulf between me and my ex would not lessen. I felt that every time I tried to come to terms with what had happened

between us and find the reason for our failure, the distance only increased. So, I eventually decided to let go out of fear that I might lose him entirely. While I was in no mood for a new romance—the last one still hurt way too much—the last thing I wanted was to be alone. This crushed me with a terrible weight, psychologically speaking, so I needed someone's attention. I wanted to hear someone say, even just once in a while, that they cared for me, that I stood for something, that I meant something.

Today, it's very different. When I went to the university, it was like taking a deep breath. For the first time ever, I had absolutely no problem adjusting. No one asked pretentious questions. People from my group accepted me for who I was. I didn't have to explain anything—they just understood what was going on. I'm very grateful to them for the understanding. Last year, I even got a gift for Men's Day, like all the other guys. I live in a single room in the dormitory, but the neighbours on my floor also seem to like me, regardless of how unusual a student I may seem in their eyes.

During a lengthy stay home owing to the Covid-19 epidemic my psychological welfare suffered, but after getting used to anti-depressants I've been feeling much better. It wasn't easy at the outset, but soon I began to feel like someone had hit my reset button—somehow, all of the bad memories stopped weighing me down. I no longer cried uncontrollably, my mood could finally be called stable, I didn't panic when faced with the smallest obstacle. I've been taking the pills for the past six months and I feel I'm slowly regaining my life.

I'm no longer the same psychologically weak and withdrawn boy I used to be. I'm still full of anxieties, but I no longer feel the need to tell myself to look as manly as possible just to make others consider the possibility of respecting my gender identity. I decided life's too short for me to get entangled in fixed paradigms, especially since I've already broken out of them. So what if sexologists and other doctors who treat transgender people believe that a trans man should not grow his hair long, wear make-up, or look adorable—they will have to revise their convictions because I don't intend to adjust, even if it's them who will decide my diagnosis. A lot of my transgender friends cut their hair just to make the right impression, and grew it back once they got the desired opinion. I don't see any point in pretending like this, even if it could make things easier for me. I've grown to believe that's what's right.

My life is changing, I'm changing, the world around me is also changing. Beliefs evolve—why would the ways we express our sexualities or feel about them not do so, too? It seems to me that nothing is truly immutable.

There are days when I feel very manly; there are others when I feel suspended between masculinity and femininity, but I really don't mind it at all.

I don't wake up wondering who I feel like. I get up only with the belief that I need coffee because my morning coffee is the only thing I'm certain will never change.

I would like it if the heteronormative people who may end up reading this discovered—assuming they haven't already—that my life isn't very different from theirs. My days are filled with joys and sorrows the same way theirs are. I don't want anything special from life, aside from the ability to peacefully spend my days the way I want to. I fear that ability might be taken away from me because the political and social climate of late has been fairly unwelcoming for people like me. I don't feel the need to play the victim, but I also don't intend to shy away from those who unjustly accuse me of being a deviant. I feel as much as anyone else. I know that there is no justification for causing others distress and injury, especially not if it's based on anxieties and prejudices. I hope others will realise this soon too, if they haven't already.

22

BARTŁOMIEJ DĘBNIAK [Born 1997, cis male, gay, raised and living in Gdańsk.]

My dear diary..... This is probably how I should start, but this is not a saccharine story of a 23-year-old from Gdańsk. This is a true story about growing up, self-discovery, acceptance issues, as well as various colours and shades of life.... But let's start from the beginning...

March 1997
It has happened. Crying, screaming, and here I am. A little red fellow named Bartek. I'm doing well, I'm a big baby. My only activities are eating, sleeping and crying, of course: D Never again will my life be so carefree hahaha: D I'm developing well, although I'm a late talker, the consequences of which will come out later hahaha: D (I never shut up): P

Birthday, 2002
My 5th birthday. I don't remember much, except the moment when my grandma got there and handed me my present!!!! I got my first and last skirt!!!! Ever since I can remember, I've loved women in beautiful, long, colourful, patterned dresses. I even had my Barbie dolls, who always had the most beautiful dresses. My colouring books had to feature princesses, because that's the only thing I used to colour hahaha: D Back in early childhood, I would always wear my grandmother's skirts when I came to visit. I loved twirling around in them, watching them undulate. I could go on for hours. Now, when you want to get rid of children, you give them a phone or turn on cartoons. For me a skirt was enough, hahaha: D A week after the birthday it disappeared... To this day I don't know what happened to it...

Summer, 2003
Dad's departure. It was rough, but he did it for us, for our well-being. I still remember the tears, saying goodbye at the door, waiting for the phone to ring... This is the moment when my mother became a hero. She starts bringing up two children by herself (I have a 3-year-old brother), and in addition she works and starts to build a house. Nobody can tell me at this point that women are the weaker sex...

Primary school

The only thing I remember from that period is the garland of girls around me and the dozens of warnings in the pupil's logbook. Yes, I was a ladies' man. I dated every girl in my class, and kissed them too, hahaha: D I was such a Don Juan: D And the warnings were a matter of my teacher not liking me!!! 95% of them were for chatting... But is it my fault that I'm curious and sociable? No...: P I was always a good student. Learning was never a problem for me. It was different with P. E. hahaha: D I never liked doing exercise in those classes. But there's a simple reason for that. I don't like football, and in my class it was the only thing we played... However, this doesn't mean that I wasn't involved in sports at all. I went to the swimming pool and did ballroom dancing. During the latter I had my first contact with otherness, freedom, colour and openness. Beautiful people, colourful clothes, sensual movements and the closeness of two human beings. Something beautiful, different and thought-provoking. This is also the period where I start wandering around the Internet looking for the first information about sex, but still of the straight variety. It interested, excited me. But I think it was mostly about the adrenaline that comes with doing something illegal. The sixth grade of primary school was the period where I explored my knowledge of erotica. Unfortunately, all the knowledge I got came from the Internet. I didn't have sex education at school, and my parents didn't talk about "those" topics. It wasn't until a few years later that they wanted to explain to me where babies come from: P That's also when I first came into contact with the concept of sexual orientation. Suddenly it turns out that people don't only live in heterosexual relationships!!! This is the moment when I start thinking... 12 years old, that's how old I am when my first thoughts related to men appeared... But let's start from the beginning. While I was watching porn (heterosexual of course), it was more the guy, his torso, his legs, his penis that caught my attention. I thought it was nothing bad, until one time the boys in my class started talking about porn, what they were watching, etc. I sat quietly and listened. Then it became clear that each of them was paying attention to the woman, her breasts, her vagina. I was never interested in that. It was the first signal for me, as well as a sign that maybe something was wrong... And so, all through the sixth grade I was exploring the topic of sexuality and orientation, and reflecting on myself. I don't talk about it with anybody. This is the moment when my relatively peaceful life ends. The colours vanish and darkness is coming.

Middle school

New class, new people, new teachers. The first semester goes by relatively smoothly. I meet new people, the circles start to tighten. It's also the moment when I hear slurs targeted at myself for the first time. Faggot, fag, pansy, poof, homo. It hurts, it hurts a lot. At that moment, I didn't realise why this was happening. It's only at this point that I'm starting to wonder if maybe I'm not straight after all. Because while watching porn, fantasising, I still pay more attention to the guy than to his partner. However, I still hold the values instilled in me by my parents in my mind. I dream about a wife, two children, a beautiful house and a good job. I even have a preliminary outline of my wedding... I still don't talk about it with anyone, I keep it to myself.

Middle school, second grade = darkness, pain, blood, loneliness

This is the worst time in my life. Even at this moment, as I write about it, I can feel the stress building up inside me, how uncomfortable I feel. I haven't fully worked through it yet. Plus, not many people know about what was going on at the time. Maybe writing about it will help me a little. I'm not sure it will, but I'll be honest. So, from the top. 1st of September, first day of school. The noise, the commotion, the smiling faces all around. We enter the classroom and there he is. He's sitting in the last row. Wearing a black leather jacket, a white collarless shirt and sunglasses. You can't see his eyes, but everyone knows that he studies everyone one by one when we enter the classroom. He doesn't say a word. At the end of commencement, the class teacher says that we'll have a new classmate. At that moment my sentence was passed. But of course I found out about this after a few weeks... The first days of school go by normally. Classes, recesses, talks, learning. Nothing special. It all begins after about two weeks. Now, in retrospect, I think He was just observing, exploring the territory. At the very beginning He was very quiet, though the entire school found him very interesting. The reason is simple. He's the grandson of the former president of Poland. Everyone wondered what someone like that was doing in a state school rather than a private one? Simple: he'd been expelled from the latter. After about a month, he started to feel at ease. It turned out that he smoked, liked alcohol, and that picking up chicks was nothing new to him—plus he was rich. He must have impressed the boys from my class with all this, because after a month he already had amassed a very large circle of friends. Everyone wanted to hang out with him, because thanks to him they had access to free cigarettes and booze. He was no longer alone, he'd formed a pack of friends. And then he chose me as his

target... The name-calling started, pushing, poking, making stupid jokes, humiliating. Other boys followed his lead. The whole class turned away from me, all my friends. Because anyone who took my side became his victim. Every new day was worse and worse for me. Every day I felt less and less like coming to school. I started to play truant, my grades started to drop, I was withdrawing into myself. I didn't talk to anyone about it. Once I went to the class teacher to tell her what was going on. She told me: "You're embellishing things, they're just silly, innocent jokes." I don't know if spitting, dousing with water, taking and destroying private things, pushing, kicking, beating, destroying someone mentally, bullying, are jokes. Not for me, but let each person judge for themselves. I remember it like today; it was the 5th of January. I was alone at home. I had grown tired of it all. I went out on the balcony, took a hammer in my hand, went to the bathroom with it. I smashed a disposable razor to retrieve a razor blade. I got into the bath and... I didn't have the balls to do it, once and for all. I ended up with a few marks, a few individual trickles of blood. Looking back on it now, I think it was a cry of despair, a plea for someone to notice, to help me. A silent cry for help. Nobody helped, nobody noticed. If they noticed, then they didn't react. I have no hard feelings towards my parents. My dad was away and my mum had to look after the family, the flat, the children and herself. She was also going through a very bad time in her life. I survived until the end of the school year. Of course, I was still His enemy, the boys' enemy. But I stopped responding to it. Name-calling, being treated like a punching bag became normal for me. I just wanted to get through each day at a time, and that was it. Of course, I happened to cut myself a few more times, unsuccessfully as you can tell. I think the perfect summary of my sophomore year of middle school is that I still didn't know my sexual orientation. I didn't know if I was gay or maybe bi. I knew that I was definitely not straight.

Third grade = confidence, strength, fighting back

Coming back to school after the summer holidays, I was more confident. I spent the whole summer in a forest, in the Kashubia region. Thinking, reading books, various self-help guides. I started to build myself up from the inside. Spending time with my dad has also helped me a lot. Even though he doesn't know about anything, he's helped me. He's very calm, never argues with anyone, and is a very wise person. Evenings spent with him by the fireplace, or mornings with a fishing rod in hand, were very valuable for me. When I returned to school, I no longer walked around with my head down. I was able to stand up for myself, to talk back. My old

friends, the ones I was with right to the moment they'd abandoned me, tried to apologise. They even texted and called me during the summer. To this day I don't know why they'd suddenly moved away from the boy. Anyway, we never became close like before. Yes, we talked, we smiled, but I kept remembering, and I still remember, what had happened and how they'd behaved. The end of the year was approaching fast. I was counting the days until I'd be able to walk out of the school. As I recall, there was exactly a month left until the end of the year. I got a text. A sext, to be exact. A dear friend of mine placed a sex ad on my behalf on a gay website. He put my number, my photo there. An endless stream of messages followed. Yes, it upset me, but I didn't give in. I had that strength only because I knew that in a few days the year would be over and I'd never see him again. And that's how it was. End of the school year, certificate in hand and freedom!!!

It was also the moment when I realised I was gay. I didn't want to look at women in porn anymore. I only wanted to look at beautiful male bodies with big, thick, straight, firm penises.

High school

A very interesting time in my life. On the one hand, it was very exciting because of my first love, learning about my sexuality, and meeting fantastic people on the way. On the other hand, this time was very challenging and difficult. But the difficulties stemmed mainly from my inner metamorphosis. I'd been an insecure, shy person, living in the closet, and I turned into an extremely confident, courageous, aware gay man who walks straight ahead with a smile on his face and his head held high! Today, a certain saying comes to mind, which I repeat to myself: "You're down, get up, fix your crown, and shut up." That's what my life looks like now. But it's been a long, winding road to get there.

Coming to high school, I didn't know anyone in my class. Entirely new people. Nobody knew me, nor my past. This guaranteed I got a fresh start, a clean slate. From the very beginning I made friends with a girl and a boy. By the end of the first month there were eight friends in our group. Throughout high school we stuck with each other like that. They were also the first people I came out to. I was very relieved to be finally able to talk to someone about it. They were happy that I told them. Of course they'd already known, I just confirmed the fact: D Anyway, even now one good friend of mine keeps telling me that even if I wear the most masculine outfit in the world, a uniform or a track suit, I'll still look gay hahaha: D I keep wondering what she means, hahaha: D

Several people from my middle school, including some from my former class, also went to the high school. Those few who were responsible for fucking up my life during my middle school days were also trying to do it here. But it didn't work out so well for them. First of all, I was already much more mature and confident, and I slowly learned to not give a damn about the opinions of people who didn't matter to me. Secondly, people in high schools are no longer impressed by someone yelling "faggot" or "cunt" in the school halls. Hardly anyone pays attention to it. Thirdly, I had my new friends. Young, open-minded, tolerant people who, as soon as they heard that someone was teasing me, immediately stood up for their friend. This is how, at the end of my first year in high school, I finally had some peace and quiet. My tormentors eventually gave themselves a break. I could finally lead a normal school life.

At school I was at ease, my friends knew about my orientation, they respected and accepted it, so I didn't feel alienated. The only thing I needed to be happy was to meet other people like me. At the beginning of high school I didn't know about any gay websites or apps. I didn't know that such things existed. I was nervous about the fact that I didn't know any other gay people. Today I'm aware that I did know them. But I wasn't aware of it. I started looking online for chat rooms so I could talk to someone. I found one. I know it doesn't exist anymore, but back then a lot of people were visiting the site. I started to visit it too, and to post. I delved into that world. Usually everyone was looking for sex, but there was an exception. K—because that's what I'll call him here—was different. The first day we met on the site, we texted for a few hours. Zero questions about sex, role in sex, fetishes etc. Just a casual conversation to get to know each other. At the end of the day we exchanged email addresses to communicate in the future. Not 20 minutes had passed before I got an email from him. After a week of intense texting and butterflies in our tummies, we met. He picked me up and we went for a walk. K was a very handsome guy. Dark hair, light stubble, slightly darker complexion, about my height, slim, and older. In a word, a very attractive man. We dated for almost a year after our first walk. It was wonderful. It was with him that I experienced my first time. I trusted him. I knew he wouldn't hurt me. And I was right. He took proper care of me, he was very gentle.

As a result, I remember it very well. I didn't have a bad first time experience like most people. After that, every time we made love it felt wonderful, romantic, painless. I felt that he cared for me and looked after me. Unfortunately, our idyll came to an abrupt end... One morning he dropped me off at my school and drove to work himself. I remember as if

it were today the last text message I sent him while walking into school: "Spaghetti for lunch?." I'm waiting for a reply to this day. At first I thought he was busy with work and that's why I didn't hear from him. By the evening there was still nothing but silence. I called, but it went to voicemail. Meanwhile, I heard somewhere from the news or the Internet that there had been a fatal traffic accident on the route to his work. I absorbed the news but didn't pay much attention to it. After two days of silence and voicemails, I went to his block of flats. I knew perfectly well what time he left for work so I knew that he should be drinking coffee and watching TVN24.[1] Walking up to the staircase, I pass the parking lot, but I don't see his car. It was strange, but I continued walking. I stopped in front of his staircase door and started to sob. There was an obituary with his name on the door... I couldn't understand it. How could this have happened? K, young, thoughtful, sensible, calm—dead!!! Standing in front of that door in tears, I was approached by his neighbour who was returning from shopping. She told me what had happened. K died in an accident after driving me to school that day. On my way home I found that news item about the crash. The description of the car, the route, the age of the victim all matched. That's when I knew it wasn't a stupid joke. K was dead. That's how I ended up alone, without him. I miss him to this day and I'm still waiting for that answer: will we have spaghetti for lunch today...

High school is a period of 18th birthdays. I remember one of them extremely vividly. The 3rd of January 2015, a birthday party thrown by a girl I knew. As usual, I get ready with my friends and we all go together. The first "happy birthday," the first toast, and the party begins. I don't know half of the guests. Suddenly He enters. Shorter, dark hair, stubble, wearing maroon trousers and braces. Our gazes meet immediately, we exchange smiles. The party continues, alcohol is flowing and there's a lot of laughter. Finally, after a few more drinks, we start talking. It turns out that he's younger than me and came with a girl. I don't mind, we keep talking. We exchange contacts and go on having fun. The next day I thank him for the party, talk to him, and that's how the conversation starts. On 21.02.2015 we officially become a couple. He broke up with his girlfriend for me and opened up to new experiences. The relationship lasted over 1.5 years. There were ups and downs, I guess like in any relationship. Now in hindsight I can say that a lot of times I was at fault and I underestimated the kind of person he was. But as they say: you learn from your mistakes.

1 TVN 24 is a private 24-hour TV news network modelled after CNN and an offshoot of TVN.

I know that he's currently in a happy relationship and is fulfilling himself professionally. That's what matters most to me. Now, I have to mention yet another very important and crucial date in my life—14.02.2015. That evening, I came home after a Valentine's Day date. Mum is sitting in the living room watching TV. I made us some tea and joined her. We're watching some programme with a gay theme. Suddenly my mum looked at me and asked—am I also like Them (the boys from the show). I was so surprised that I replied yes without thinking. That was my coming out to her. Mum didn't say anything. She began to cry and locked herself in the bedroom. I finished my tea alone... I don't know if I was ready for it, but she asked, so I answered. Now, looking back on it, I think it turned out well. Mum cried for exactly 9 days. That's how long she didn't speak to me and avoided me. For me this was the worst. I didn't know what to think, what to expect. I could only wait. After the 9 days my mother started to ask questions. Little by little we began to talk. She had the usual worries, that is, whether I'd be able to cope in life, whether society would accept me, whether my family would have a problem with it, and so on. Of course, I had to educate my mother a bit. I had to explain what homosexuality was, that it wasn't a disease, that I wouldn't dress up as a woman and that I wasn't considering transition. Step by step, mum was getting used to the idea of having a homosexual son. Things are wonderful now. My mum has met every single one of my boyfriends, she invites them over for dinners, drinks, and holidays. With my last guy we even went on holiday abroad together with my parents. But I'll get to that in a moment, let's not jump ahead. Dad found out from mum, because he'd been abroad at the time. When he returned to Poland, he just asked me if I was sure that I preferred boys. I answered him with one simple sentence "And have you always been sure that you prefer women?" The conversation ended there. Of course my dad supports and accepts me.

By 2018, I had been in a total of three relationships. Obviously, I don't regret any of them. Each of them contributed something different to my life. Over that time, my person, my character was strongly shaped. I was getting to know myself anew, discovering things I had no idea about. During that period, I learned to be more honest, assertive, confident, and hard-nosed. My sexuality has also evolved. At first, I was very closed off to the world of touch, play, pleasure. As time went by, I started to overcome it, open up and, most importantly, get rid of my complexes. Thanks to this I was able to start discovering the world of sex anew. Of course, I still have some issues I can't cope with. In the meantime, I graduated from high school as the top male student in my class and went to college. College is a different

state of mind. No one pokes their nose into other people's business, the mood is one of openness and tolerance. At least that's what it was like in the department I found myself in, and with my fellow students. Almost at once, during the first classes, it came out that I was gay. I don't remember how it happened, but I already got "that" problem out of the way. Of course, no one was particularly impressed and it was no problem at all.

There were also several unpleasant situations that occurred during that time. The first one is the most traumatic for me, the consequences of which continue to this day. I met a boy who I really liked. We dated for a while until his birthday. He organised a house party, invited his friends. The party was great. The guests were great, the food tasted good, there was plenty of alcohol. After the party we went to bed. Then he said that since it was his birthday, I should give myself to him. Of course, I had no intention of doing that, so he decided that since it was his birthday, he would just take what he wanted. He was stronger than me, and alcohol additionally did its damage... At the last moment I was saved by his totally oblivious friend. She walked into our room. He jumped off me and left... Since then I've had a huge problem with touching. I need to trust someone first and get used to their warmth.

As I wrote above, I am proud to be gay. I think that is a huge asset of mine. I'm not afraid to walk in a crowd with my head held high, with a rainbow flag. Why should I be afraid because I am "different"? I don't think I am. I'm the same as most of my peers. That's why if my partner feels like walking through the city, or a mall, holding hands, I'll gladly take his hand. Unfortunately, not everyone likes it. Once we were roughed up and spat on by a man for this very reason. We didn't do anything at the time because we were afraid. This guy was extremely aggressive and could've knocked us down with one punch. We just walked ahead, still holding hands. We didn't know that we could report it to the police, so we didn't. It was a case that *Replika*[2] posted about on its FB page. It was because of this post that I publicly came out to all my family and friends. Only a few people knew about my orientation. Of course, I wasn't hiding it, but I also didn't feel the need to tell everyone that I was gay. If someone asked, I would confirm that I was and that was that. When *Replika* reported the whole event, I commented on it. I didn't think about the fact that my activity would pop up on my wall and all of my FB friends would see what I wrote. The cousin I'm closest to called me and asked what was on my FB page. Because her sister, who didn't know about me, had just

2 *Replika*—see n. 14 on p. 61.

asked if I was gay. There was a slight jolt of horror, a shock, but I had to react somehow. Of course, I had no intention of deleting what I'd written. I wrote a general message where I confirmed my orientation and my relationship, as well as the fact that the story reported by *Replika* was true. It went up on my FB, I went to bed. In the morning the post had lots of likes and positive comments. I didn't get a single bad message. Of course, as time went on I heard somewhere that someone had said something about me etc., but I didn't worry about that, and I still don't. I've experienced so many bad things in my life that I've learned to be tough and not to give a damn about people who don't matter to me.

Over the years, I've changed a lot. As a son, brother, acquaintance, friend, partner, lover and enemy. I gained self-confidence, started to listen to my inner voice, begun to build the world around me on my own terms, and know more about what I want and expect from others. Thanks to this, I formulated principles which I follow and which allow me to live in harmony with myself. These are specifically my principles, because they've helped me to put my life in order. I cut ties with toxic people, and I'm working on solidifying my current friendships and trying to keep moving forward. During all these changes, my partner was by my side. We were together for two years. He helped me a lot to understand some stuff and to look at some situations from a distance. It was my first real relationship. We lived together, supported each other and created our own little queer family: P My whole family got to know him and had no issues with him. They went on vacation with us, we spent holidays together, he was invited to family dinners and weddings. It was the new thing that I've been looking forward to. I really wanted to create a relationship modelled after hetero couples, i.e. an honest one, with shared hobbies, respect, and without third parties. But life is never all roses. Darkness came over mine. Alcohol, violence, jealousy, breaking rules, destroying someone from within. It wasn't easy. I'm not a person who gives up quickly. I like a challenge and I'm always looking for a solution for how to fix things. I fought a very long time for this, but the effort always has to come from two sides. You can't build a road between two different people by yourself. You have to build it together. And the "contractors" on my partner's part were late, they arrived when mine had already finished....

Now it's autumn, a beautiful time of the year, when the world becomes full of colours. I'm single, I have a new job, and I look with a smile into the future. The coronavirus will not stand in the way of my happiness. The only thing that could do it is a sad short gentleman in the Polish government, but I think we can deal with him too!

23

OLGA GÓRSKA [Born 1988 in Radom, a city of over 200,000 people, cis woman, lesbian.]

Memories of Growing Up. Excerpts

Introduction. The future is now, old man. July-August 2020

The scorching summer of 2020 was punctuated by a fight "for" LGBT or "against" LGBT. The summer was punctuated by Margot, who exposed not only the obvious, namely the meagre level of tolerance in general, but also the low tolerance of our allies.[1] She proved indigestible to them. She has also proved to be indigestible to many in our community. For like any milieu, like any pigeonholed group of people, each of us is actually different, has different views, dreams, and desires. We come from different homes and backgrounds. These are clichés, yet it turns out that repeating them is still necessary. Margot was actually the one who motivated me to write about my own experiences. I look at that young, brave, and uncompromising person, who knows exactly who she wants to be—and I think that I've never been like that.

I stand apart. Perhaps I shouldn't be writing this, because I'm ashamed of it, but when I browse social media and my so-called bubble, the people with whom I should be sharing values, I often find myself rejecting them. For example, I take a look at the literary community, which I know a bit, the people who over-share from literary festivals over the summer, and I can't stand to see the same people saying the same things at every event, posting the same photos and the same hollow manifestos. And I think to myself, even though it's a hateful thought and hatred isn't something we're lacking right now: OH HOW WELL YOU'RE BEHAVING AT THESE LITERARY FESTIVALS, OH HOW YOU FIGHT FOR FREEDOM, ALMOST LIKE IN BELARUS. You'll go back to your Warsaw flats, to your Warsaw partners, drink prosecco, spritz, or whatever is fashionable this season, not recognising that the fight for queer rights is a class problem in Poland, that with every photo, sentence, and snide remark, you're rejecting people who are becoming doubly, triply excluded. We in the big cities, we university graduates, we somehow make ends meet, somehow get those mortgages; we just need to sort things out with the solicitor or go to an "insider" event. Of course, there's a sea of frustration

1 For more on Margot, see the Introduction, p. XVII—XVIII.

simmering in us (me) as well, but I also know that I am privileged in a certain way.

I'm 32 years old and have tried to stand by for a very long time. As a model representative of my generation, a millennial, I'm as devoid of illusions as I am of energy. My attitude's a product of the passivity inherited from my parents and the conviction that I lack agency, the conviction which citizens of our country absorb with their mothers' milk: "everyone steals," "my vote won't change anything," and so on in this vein. And even as I write this, I blame others. But when I watch others fight my battle, when they are arrested (I still can't believe it) for protesting in defence of fundamental human rights, I can no longer remain silent.

So I overcome my own reluctance against organising and I come forward. I take action, even though I'm lazy, I overcome my own reluctance to expose my privacy and I write. I write this memoir, an achronological story of my own growing up and coming out, about my roots and all the consequences of being a lesbian that I've faced. I've heard stories worse than mine and I've heard more interesting ones. I've been "lucky"—I've never been physically abused for being non-heteronormative. Insults, sighs, stares, whispers, shouts—yes. But never tugging, pushing, hitting.

Before I came out. Summer of Love. 2001

I vividly remember the first time I fell in love with a girl. It was in May 2001. I was thirteen years old and going through the worst version of puberty imaginable. My body was changing and I didn't understand what was happening to me, my face was changing, my height was changing, but I was also starting to change as a person. It wasn't until many years later that I made the connection between my strong feelings towards some of the girls I met along the way, and my own sexuality. Like many girls raised in my social class, in the Catholic culture of good girls, I was ashamed to talk and think about issues pertaining to my body. I knew where babies came from; my mum had told me, and besides, in the sixth grade we were lucky enough to have actual, proper lessons about reproduction. A lady from some foundation even visited the class and gave us booklets published by Always, one for boys and one for girls, about what happens to our bodies and our psyches. What sex is and whether we should be having it. What contraception and sanitary pads and tampons are. I even swiped a boy's book from the bench in front of me to get the full picture. We were all embarrassed by these lessons, but I'm glad they took place. It made me understand, in a sort of childlike way, that sex can be fun and important, but I don't have to do it just because everyone around me is

doing it. Armed with this rudimentary knowledge, I began to grow up. In 2001, I still knew nothing about the world, about who I was, and the horizon of my interests was limited by all kinds of factors. It wasn't until middle school that I recognised my own otherness, which wasn't due to sexual orientation (this wasn't up for discussion at all at the time — all of us, both boys and girls, were cis and straight), but due to a lack of cultural and economic capital.

The first girl I fell in love with was called Kamila, and was a few years older. We met on a school trip. She was the niece of one of the teachers who had organised the first trip abroad that I'd been on. We travelled by bus, all night long. She sat down next to me only because there was an empty seat. She had a walkman on, and was listening to *Elf*, a record by Varius Manx.[2] I was feeling unwell, suffering from travel sickness. We started talking, and before I knew it the night had flown by. She told me the story of her life; she was a teenager back then, so today I'm so much older than she was at the time. I fell in love with her sensitivity, with how beautiful she looked in her red dress, with the sound of her voice, with the smell of her perfume, with her beautiful hands. After that, I would find her features in every new girl I had feelings for. I sent multi-page letters to K. and checked my mailbox with a trembling heart, not knowing why I was trembling. I remembered how I looked at her after that night on the bus. The sun was coming up and we had just arrived at one of the Italian beaches. She had taken off her trousers and was standing up to her waist in the sea, with her hair down. I fantasised about going up to her and grabbing her hand, but I didn't have the courage. Despite the intensity of my first love, I forgot about this feeling for a long time, or rather pushed it deep down inside me. Because things that happened in the summer and autumn of 2001 changed not just me and the course of my life, but also shaped the history of the world. In July I heard about Jews for the first time. About the existence of Jews in general, and the existence of Jews in Poland. And on top of that: all in the context of Jedwabne.[3] The weight of history fell on my evolving mind, as right then and there I realised not only that the

2 Varius Manx (established in 1989) is a pop-rock band from Łódź that enjoyed its heyday in the mid-1990s; *Elf* came out in 1995 and was certified quintuple platinum in Poland.

3 The massacre of the Jews of Jedwabne, a village outside of Łomża in north-eastern Poland, took place in July 1941. In 2000, memory of that event was revived, sparking a historical debate about Polish complicity in the Holocaust and prompting an investigation by the Institute of National Remembrance, which confirmed the crime was perpetrated by ethnic Poles. See: Jan Tomasz Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton 2001); Anna Bikont, *The Crime and the Silence: Confronting the Massacre of Jews in Wartime Jedwabne* (London 2015).

country where I received my *normal* Catholic-patriotic upbringing used to have some citizens other than Polish Catholics, but also that these citizens were killed in a brutal way, in brutal circumstances. In September, before the eyes of the whole world, two planes crashed into the towers in Manhattan, killing almost three thousand people and sparking two wars that would last for years. Little could we have known that this ruthless attack was the event that would most profoundly shape the world in which I'd grow up and live. For the kid that I was, going to a new school, a middle school that had only been in existence for a year,[4] was an equally dramatic event that September. Middle school quickly taught me not to show that I was different, and yet both me and many other kids experienced emotional torture there.

Over the thirty-two years of my life I've witnessed many terrible political upheavals, wars, murders, but it was the attack on the World Trade Center—for reasons I didn't understand at the time, in a context I didn't know about—that haunted me for months afterwards, both in real life and in dreams. I had countless nightmares of planes crashing into the towers.

K., the first girl I fell in love with, vanished from my life as suddenly as she appeared. To this day, I still have a few CDs and some letters from her tucked away at the bottom of my wardrobe. She couldn't reciprocate my unnamed affection—she was concerned with grown up stuff by then, even though she was still a kid. She stopped writing back to me, and I feared that my letters had been lost somewhere on the way to or from Berlin. Sometimes I fantasise about bumping into her in the street. She wouldn't be able to recognise me; I'm not the girl I was twenty years ago. As Świetlicki[5] wrote, people "grow fat, swollen, grey." But I would recognise her: even then her face had started to hint at what she'd look like after forty. I know girls like that, women like that, barflies.

Born in '88, I grew up in the sunburnt nineties to the rhythm of Ace of Base, the Spice Girls and Eurodance. My parents were working class, and all my grandparents were too. I had a poor childhood. We didn't starve, but if it weren't for the help of my grandparents it would have been tough. In Radom, before Balcerowicz, there were big factories: leather-makers

4 In 1999, a school system reform was implemented in Poland, shifting from a two-tier system of an eight-year primary school followed by a four-year high school to three tiers: six years of primary school, three years of gymnasium (middle school), and three years of high school.

5 Marcin Świetlicki (b. 1961) is a Polish poet and writer, frontman of the alternative rock group Świetliki. Poster boy for individualist revolt, his lyrics are tinged with self-irony and coloured by encroaching ennui and express a distrust of big politics.

Radoskór, the Łucznik weapons factory, and the Polski Tytoń tobacco plant, as well as smaller ones. They all underwent "restructuring" in the 1990s.[6] I heard this sweet little word many times as a child, not realising that it concealed the nightmare that had been inflicted on my town, a nightmare from which it never recovered. Thirty percent of Radom adults lost their jobs, including my dad. My mother hadn't worked since she gave birth to my youngest brother. I was the eldest of three siblings, and we lived away from the big housing estates, the inner city blocks, in a small single-family house. The perk: a neighbourhood yard that belonged only to us. We played football there (until I heard for the first time that I was a girl and shouldn't), we held Olympic games, my brothers climbed trees while I hid in the grass and read. The downside: being the eldest sister, I had no rapport with the other children. I reigned like a tyrant over my microscopic kingdom, but I knew nothing about relationships between the kids, about current fashions, about what others listened to and watched, what they liked to do and how you should behave. As a result, when I finally went to school I experienced a cognitive shock and for the first years of my education I was treated as a weirdo by my peers. Like every child and teenager, I had to learn to adapt. I adapted, sometimes better, sometimes worse. I pretended in front of the cool kids that I knew songs by Kaliber 44[7] and watched *Big Brother* (though I only watched it when I mustered up the courage to ask my parents; usually by the time it aired I was already going to bed), but they wouldn't let me watch *Świat według Kiepskich*, because they thought the show was stupid and vulgar.[8] I thought so myself, and so at school I just had to pretend I watched that stuff. I didn't even have a fleeting contact with the "projects" subculture that was so strong

6 The Balcerowicz Plan, devised by Leszek Balcerowicz (b. 1947), politician and economist and Minister of Finance in the first two Polish governments after 1989, consisted in the application of strict neoliberal dogma to the Polish economy, leading to the dissolution ("restructuring")of a vast number of state enterprises for the purposes of adaptation to the demands of the free market. This resulted in cuts to the workforce and production and eventual foreclosure of the enterprises, which ushered in a massive increase in joblessness and economic destitution in vast swathes of the society, especially among workers. Minor urban centres such as Radom suffered particularly badly due to the failure of a limited number of enterprises that often provided income for a majority of families in a given city.

7 Kaliber 44 is a Polish hip-hop collective from Silesia, formed in 1994. Their first three releases, published in 1996–2000, garnered widespread approval among fans and critics alike and ushered in a period of expansion of hip-hop in Poland.

8 *Świat według Kiepskich* (The World According to the Shoddies) was a comedy series broadcast in 1999–2022, portraying the life of a dysfunctional lower-class family (by the surname of Kiepski) with all the stereotypical baggage of vulgarity, debasement, and alcoholism. It was broadly modelled after the American sitcom *Married... With Children* (1987–1997), which had been broadcast in Poland as *Świat według Bundych* starting in the 1990s.

in the 1990s and early 2000s. I didn't hang out in front of a tower block, I didn't have friends from the projects; frankly, the projects scared me. Because we lived away from the city centre, and from real problems, my childhood was filled with reading and church. I spent a great deal of time in church. My mother and my grandmother were both very religious, and I loved the masses—they were loud, colourful, the church smelled of must and incense, I liked the scent and the theatrical atmosphere (I didn't call it that at the time, but I experienced it as such). Everything the priest did seemed fascinating to me. My religiosity was very fervent and sincere; even today, with a new perspective after everything I've been through, it seems very authentic. I also had a certain church-related dream. I really wanted to be a priest, and for many childhood years I thought I had a vocation. I experienced a shock when it turned out that I could not and would never become one. My parents first told me that I couldn't play football with boys, and then that I couldn't be a priest. I took it badly. I didn't know what to do with myself. And women's football teams and religions where women can celebrate masses were as distant and unknown to me as the Amazon jungle or New York. I didn't even know they existed. Apart from football and church, in my pre-school and early school days I also liked reading. This was allowed, as my gender didn't matter in a library. I borrowed countless books from our small school library. I read three titles in particular over and over again: *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Robinson Crusoe,* and *In Desert and Wilderness*.[9] They were all old, written by men, and concerned with men's adventures. It didn't matter to me, especially with *In Desert and Wilderness,* which I read about twenty times in primary school. At first I thought I was in love with Staś. He was brave, handsome, God-fearing. A noble patriot who did not deny his faith. Then I realised I wasn't in love with him, but rather that I wanted to *be* Staś—to have all these adventures and inspire feelings of admiration in girls like Nel. Staś's greatest sin was pride, and that's where I also felt a kinship with him. Pride doesn't suit a girl, neither does football or donning a priestly cassock.

My working class parents, good, honest people, never got hold of the *How to Raise a Child Without Cultural Capital* guidebook — to this day

9 Henryk Sienkiewicz's *W pustyni i w puszczy* (*In Desert and Wilderness*) is a deeply Orientalist adventure novel published in 1911 (first English edition: 1912) that tells the story of two children—Polish fourteen-year-old boy Staś Tarkowski and English eight--year-old girl Nel Rawlison—who are taken hostage in Egypt by Arabs during the Mahdist War (1881–1899) and then escape to safety with the help of two slaves they had freed from the Arab rebels.

they don't know what cultural capital is — but they worked hard all their lives so that I could study philosophy, drink vodka, and debate about the symbolism of chess in the Renaissance.

Before 2001, there was only one thing that indicated that a fantasy about a white Labrador Retriever in a big house with a garden, two children, and a husband (I must have seen such a family, in such a house, with such a dog in some TV commercial, and I incorporated it into my symbolic field as "my dream"), was not my own fantasy after all. It all started with the fact that I loved music. While my brothers and the other kids would turn on the Cartoon Network after coming home from school, or wait for *Captain Tsubasa*,[10] I scanned for Viva, MTV Base and, above all, VH1. I was terribly fond of music videos. One summer day I caught a glimpse of a particular video. There were two girls in it; one was blonde like me and my mum, the other had dark hair and raspberry lips. The blonde seemed braver to me, and the one with dark hair looked like she needed looking after. I walked up very close to the TV, the kind with a screen you could get really close to and see tiny dots: red, blue and green. I walked up to it at arm's length and remembered that we weren't allowed to do that. Dad often shouted: "Don't touch the TV!" The evidence of the crime, in the form of fingerprints, was too easily left on the screen. When I watch that video clip 25 years later I feel exactly the same sensation that I felt then. Excitement. I could watch the video for "Crazy" by Aerosmith on an endless loop. The tension between Liv Tyler and Alicia Silverstone was the first time in my life I'd seen that kind of tension between women, girls. When, in the climax, Liv Tyler enters an amateur striptease competition and Silverstone pretends to be her boyfriend, and then they go to bed, just to have an innocent pillow fight, I froze because of the tension.

When I was in high school, I didn't want to look at Alicia and Liv anymore, I wanted to be Alicia or Liv. When I was in college, I didn't want to be them anymore, but I wanted to go to bed with them.

Neither at school nor at home had I heard a single thing about homosexuals. Neither good nor bad. The topic simply didn't exist at all, which meant that for a very long time I didn't know what it meant. Even in middle school, which seems unbelievable today, I was convinced that "homosexuals" were men in same-sex relationships and "heterosexuals" were women in same-sex relationships. I didn't have anyone to ask, and

10 *Captain Tsubasa* is an anime series tracing the football careers of a group of young boys in Japan. The series' original run was produced in 1983–1986; it was first broadcast in Poland (in original and with Italian dubbing, both with Polish voice-over) in the mid-1990s.

even if I had, I think I would have been embarrassed to come across as a dumbass. I can't believe that just fifteen years ago I didn't know these things, nor did I have any way of checking them out—the Internet arrived in my house when I was in the last year of high school (I remember it exactly, two guys from Neostrada, the sound of dial-up Internet connection on the phone.[11] I didn't know what a revolutionary role the net played for queer people—suddenly they could find each other, emerging from the underground, from secret signs. I was told about this later by various older queer people).

I recently talked to a friend from high school. At the time we exchanged CDs and films, recommended books to each other. She was a lesbian and I was a lesbian, but we didn't know about each other. Or rather, as it turned out later, she knew about me, but I was sending conflicting signals. When she tried to switch to more private topics, I would talk about boys and Jesus. When she invited me for a sleepover, I would accept the invitation and then run back home (I really disliked sleeping in a bed that wasn't mine, although I don't know where I got this dislike). During this conversation, I told her that I envied modern teenagers a bit. That they have each other, the Internet, queer contacts, TV shows, and films with young lesbian, gay, and transgender people, that they live in a world where their existence is real, where they have the language and tools to describe themselves. She didn't agree with me. She thought we were better off because no one persecuted us. We argued a bit. Nobody persecuted us, that's true. I wouldn't have preferred to be persecuted, but I would've preferred not to be so alone, so invisible.

The Second Summer of Love

In order not to feel that way, I pretended. When I started watching *Dawson's Creek*, my first "grown up" series, I used to tell my mum and friends that I liked Pacey. But I actually liked Jen. It was Jen I dreamt about at night, it was the scenes with Jen I looked forward to. I explained it to myself that she was the most interesting character in the series, but that wasn't true. I just fancied her. *Dawson's Creek* also featured the first gay character I remember seeing on TV, Jack. I also liked Jen because she was supportive of Jack. I watched the show with my mother. I don't remember us talking about the character's orientation, but I do remember how

11 Neostrada was the first major service providing relatively fast access to the Internet over phone lines in Poland, inaugurated in 2001, initially exclusively in Warsaw. It was operated by Telekomunikacja Polska, a state-owned company that owned and maintained the phone network in Poland.

sorry I felt every time someone was mean to him. I knew, of course, that God didn't allow it, that it was a sin, but I still felt sorry for the boy, just as a fellow human being.

I didn't get to see my first full-blooded homosexual romance until I was a high school student. It was *Brokeback Mountain*, one of the formative films for our generation. After the screening I wept like a little girl. Years later, I learned that Ang Lee's film was part of a certain narrative about homosexuals mired by tragedy, violence and rejection, but at the time love was the most important thing for me. Besides, all films of that time were like that. If gays and lesbians and all queer people appeared on the screen at all, they couldn't count on a Hollywood happy ending. As I write all this, I wonder why I'm mentioning cinema at all, but I know the answer to that question. It concerns the problem of representation. It's a broad issue that most often boils down to idiotic comments online like "soon the Pope will be gay and black hehehe," which strip representation of its seriousnesss. Anyone who grew up in the pop culture of the 1990s and 2000s knows how much representation LGBT people had. Hardly any. We were looking for our "moments," for someone resembling ourselves, but these weren't the kind of films that TVP1 would air in primetime.[12] Why is representation so important to me and why, even though I'm thirty-two years old, does the issue still make me angry? Because no one who hasn't grown up in a minority knows what it's like to grow up, to mature, to experience their teenage dramas and not see anyone like themselves around. It makes a person feel sick, different, non-existent and unnecessary. Television has had a huge influence in shaping our imaginarium and since there were no people like me on it, I very quickly became convinced that they simply didn't exist. That I don't exist and that what I feel is unimportant, unnecessary, out of place. So now, in my thirties, I'm catching up on all the queer teen dramas and teen films; I know it may seem ridiculous, but it's how I compensate for my own unlived (or rather lived in extreme obscurity) youth and adolescence. I'm enjoying watching these films, while often disregarding their artistic quality (although the better they are, the more I enjoy them). I'm just happy to see queer people in cinema, in series, in games. Anyone who hasn't grown up as a member of that kind of minority won't understand why it's so important to show young gay, lesbian, and transgender people on screen. So that these kids, these sensitive kids on the verge of maturity, in this sensitive period that everyone has lived through when everyone felt on edge, because that's what the teenage

12 TVP1, Channel One of the state-owned Polish Television Network (TVP).

years are like—so that these kids aren't so lonely. Even if they grow up in some backwater, at least in their own eyes, even if they aren't understood by their parents and friends, they won't be alone. That's very important, and I know that because I felt terribly lonely myself. I looked for subtext everywhere I could, even though I didn't know what I was looking for.

I was in high school when I first kissed a girl, and I was in high school when I first slept with a girl. She was very religious, just like me, she struggled with large family problems, just like me, she loved watching films, just like me. Her brother worked in a DVD rental shop. He made fun of the films we rented, as the neighbourhood audience hunted for new releases, rom-coms and action films, while we searched the shelves for Almodóvar and von Trier, lying under a literal layer of dust. We visited each other at home and watched films. We went to mass together, and in the second year of high school we started to sit at the same desk during classes. That was the year we both turned eighteen. Her birthday was in February.

February 2006 was exceptionally cold. A month earlier, my beloved grandmother had died. I hadn't fully recovered from that death by then, but today I have no doubt that her passing accelerated my coming of age. My grandmother was a repatriate from Belarus who all her life said *vot* instead of *to* (that) and *sobaka* instead of *pies* (dog).[13] I adored her, loved watching *The Bold and the Beautiful* with her and saying the Chaplet of the Sacred Heart of Jesus prayer. In the eighteenth year of my life, my grandmother died and I realised that I was no longer a child.

On the birthday of the first girl I kissed, we partied with a large group of friends all night, but eventually everyone fell asleep. Everyone except us. We talked until six in the morning, in hushed whispers, huddled together, but I suddenly insisted on leaving. I was dead tired. I walked along the snow-covered, silent pavements, and the snow creaked under my feet. Even though I'd had a sleepless night and the cold was pinching my cheeks and nose, I felt happy. When I got to the bus stop, I heard I got a text message (I was the lucky owner of a Nokia 3310). The text was from her. She wrote (I remember it very clearly, although it's been 14 years): "I have to tell you something important. Let's meet today." I replied: "I know." She wrote back: "You can't know." The bus arrived, empty. Instead of going all the way home, I got off two stops early. I made it in time for the morning Mass, during which I fell asleep. I was woken up after the sermon, left the church in shame and came home frozen to the bone. Whenever

13 The words provided represent common examples of broadly understandable Russian borrowings that are rarely used anymore by people in Poland.

I felt sinful, I went to church. It took me a very long time to free myself from Catholic guilt, many years after I had already stopped believing and being part of the community. She didn't text me all Sunday, and neither did I. The next day she didn't come to school, but came to see me "after school." She said: "You remember I wrote that I had to tell you something." I said: "You don't have to, I know." She replied: "You can't." We fell silent for a long while. I didn't say anything, she didn't say anything. Finally she said: "I've fallen in love with you." I said: "I know."

I'll go back in my memories to a time just a few months before the Monday I've described above. Another friend, one who turned out to be a lesbian after high school, used to lend me a lot of books. Among them was a thin novel by Jeanette Winterson that I had never heard of. I read the introduction from the translator and suddenly a new world opened up to me. The translator wrote that in English it is not necessary to specify the gender of the narrator, and in this book that was exactly the case—the protagonist has no gender, or has all genders at once, resembling Virginia Woolf's Orlando, whom I also didn't know at the time. In the Polish translation a grammatical gender had to be selected, and the author herself advised the Polish translator that, in that case, it could not be male. The narrator in the Polish translation of *Written on the Body* is therefore a woman. A woman who talks about all the women she has been with, and the one and only one she has loved. The book is funny, sexy, and moving. I must have read those 160 pages twenty times in my second and third year of high school, and knew the book almost by heart. It was the first time since *In Desert and Wilderness* that something had shaken me so profoundly. It was beautifully written, and the love depicted in it became my dream.

A few years later, when I fell in love with a girl and knew that this was it, love, I didn't have the language to confess my love to her, to speak to her at all. Everything I knew, from books, from films, from life, belonged to the hetero-narrative, and not all of these things fit. So I spoke *Written on the Body* to her. Then she said: "You're talking to me with this book. Don't—I want you to speak your own language." She caught me, exposed me. It's strange, to belong to a world whose language, history, and symbols you don't know. Only recently I started to say with pride: Stonewall is MY story, AIDS in the '80s and '90s is MY story. At some point, it dawned on me that the history we were taught at school was a story written by someone, from their perspective. Mainly, it's the history of men's wars, conquests, partitions. Histories of customs and morals, herstories—all of this didn't exist when I was a high school student, and was in its infancy when I went to university. I studied history and the best and most

important thing I learnt during my time at the university was that every story is written by someone, that every event, every battle, era, city, every biography, can be told in dozens of different ways: using class, gender, queer analysis. What the sources "are saying" and what they don't say is an ongoing, fascinating puzzle.

But before I acquired all this knowledge, I stood alone in disarray and despair, between the rigid framework of my Catholic upbringing and the increasingly clear signals that I liked the boys from my class less, and the girls more. I didn't know what to do with these feelings, I had no one to turn to with this embarrassing problem, I didn't know what it said about me. Am I sick? Would I be a source of shame for my family? I was sure about one thing: that I was sinful.

After my friend had confessed her crush on me, we talked about it for a long time. During that conversation, the phrase "We're not lesbians. It's something else" was repeated multiple times. Today that makes me laugh. She wasn't a lesbian, I know that for sure, but me? I had always been one. Even so, she was the one who kissed me first. She kissed me. She kissed me. I couldn't believe it. I returned the kiss, as well as I could. The way I wanted to be kissed. I promised myself that I wouldn't stop kissing her, that I wouldn't open my eyes. I wouldn't know what to say. I promised myself that I would always kiss that way. As if there was nothing more important to me. We sat in my room, on my narrow bed, between my things that I loved so much—my hi-fi tower, my collection of CDs and cassette tapes, my books and movie posters—on my Bugs Bunny blanket, and I was kissing her. Tori Amos' *Little Earthquakes* was playing in the background. I took off her silly fleece sweatshirt, not sure what I was doing. She had a plain T-shirt underneath, with her full bra showing through. I took off my jacket. Suddenly she was in just her underwear. I could still turn back. But her breathing muffled all other sounds, the creak of the bed merely setting the rhythm for me. *Little Earthquakes* is 57 minutes long. I don't like the last three songs on it, but at that moment I was too busy to pay attention to it. When we finished making love, the album ended and I heard my younger brothers' footsteps, then the sound of the fridge closing, the hum of the TV, their hushed voices. They knew they weren't allowed in my room, but I panicked. No one could ever know. We got dressed and I didn't know what to say. No film I had seen ever got to that point. So we lay in silence, already dressed. She tried to hug me, but I wanted to be left alone. I had never felt anything like this before: a satisfied excitement that exhausted itself only to fill me anew. She asked if she could stay; she often slept at my place then, when we listened to music and watched movies.

I didn't want her to stay, but I agreed. We made love all night, even though from today's perspective I find it hard to call it lovemaking — we were children. She asked in the morning: "Am I going to lose a friend?" and I replied: "Never." Of course I was lying. How was I supposed to know what would happen to us? It all really happened, although I can't say today how much of it is my literary reconstruction and how much is the truth, apart from the last piece of dialogue.

I experienced my first time with her, which I'd imagined very differently. I was the one who was supposed to be guided, not to be the guide. I was the one who was supposed to lie underneath someone (underneath him) and wait for things to happen, because I didn't know, didn't know what to expect. I had touched a man's body before, a man's chest, a man's neck, a man's arms and thighs. They were hard and had a pungent smell. I had already kissed a man's lips, which were as rough as a cat's tongue. But when I felt her mouth, her soft, cherry lips, her smooth flesh under my hands, her breasts, her thighs, I froze. We didn't know how to do it, we didn't know how to have sex, but it's a simple act that you master quickly, very quickly. I desired her, I wanted someone to desire me.

From that moment on, from my first time with a woman when I was 18, through the next five years and several other girlfriends, until coming out, I told myself every day: "I am not a lesbian." And I confessed my sin regularly, believing every day that God would send me a good boy to marry and start a family with. These were the worst five years of my life; the self-loathing, feeling disgusted with my own desires. I became a student, I continued to fall in love with my female friends, and I drowned all my anxieties and fears in booze, explaining to myself that I was just living the student life.

In 2010, I met a girl and I understood the difference between this love and everything I had experienced until then. I fell in love like I'd never fallen in love before, I fell in love as if I were in a romance novel. I dropped out of university and moved to Gdańsk, where she lived. She was a self-aware lesbian who had already been in genuine relationships with women. It was from her that I re-learned the word "lesbian," which had been so odiously twisted in my mind.

Still ahead of coming out. The Book. 2010. The Bad Word

I have been writing a book for several years.[14] Being queer means constantly censoring yourself and your language. I cut out three passages

14 The book has since been published to critical acclaim: Olga Górska, *Nie wszyscy pójdziemy do raju* (All of Us Won't Go to Heaven; Okoniny 2022).

from the book that seemed too journalistic, too incompatible with the narrative. I'm posting them here, in this diary of scraps of my memories and imperfect sentences.

Passage 1: Apparently there are some women who are not disgusted by the word "lesbian," although it isn't as nice and neutral as "gay." I don't know if there's any reason why it's immediately associated with the act of licking, nor do I know why the term "Sapphists" hasn't caught on; perhaps it sounds pretentious, but still better than lesbian. You can talk about sapphic loving, but I mean a noun, nice and cheerful like gay, even like *fairy* or *queer*. I can't find one, so as simple as this attempt to name myself is, I have to strain my muscles to sound neutral. Lesbian, lesbian, lesbian, I'm a lesbian, lesbian. I have practised this over and over again. And yet what remains is: LESBO LESBO LESBO. A bad word. Self-censorship is not protecting what you love, although the censor wants to give that impression. I didn't protect, I censored. I hated being a lesbian, so I censored everything about it. When you have nothing but words, no other instruments to communicate, they start to acquire a strong creative power. They distort the personality and the very sound of them becomes painful. Lesbian, lesbo. It's not pleasant to the ear and not a neutral word, like gay. It immediately connotes something ugly, not only on an aesthetic, but also on an ethical level. I ask again why the other words — pretentious, but also devoid of visual aggression — like "Sapphists" or "Sapphos" haven't found their way into common usage. A nice and cheerful gay, an angry lesbian. A word that defines a large part of who I am has become horribly distorted. I'm not going to shy away from it any longer, grind it between my teeth like something stale that I'll swallow anyway in order not to make anyone uncomfortable.

For years I hated who I was. I'd go to bed with the woman I love, saying that I loved her, wanted her, and it was true, but just as much as that I hated myself. I'd look at other women on the street and hate who I was. For many years I kept quiet and acted the wallflower during family parties, almost saying sorry for being a lesbo, and constantly thinking: I'M A FUCKING PROBLEM. I didn't want to make anyone uncomfortable because of my sexual orientation, so I pretended not to exist or to be as *normal* as they come, which made me doubly suspect. I wanted to lock up my beloved, a beautiful and bright girl, in the house, so that no one would see us, so that only I could listen to her and look at her, so that I could be queer only on the thirty or so square metres of our rented apartment. What if we got too old to be friends from college and rent a flat together? What if I had to attend some family celebration? I'd pretend to be *single,*

again. I was ashamed of who I was, thanking my Catholic upbringing for that fact above all, as well as my own evasiveness, my lifelong striving to be invisible. I loved—loved with my body and I loved with my mind—and I wanted to burn to ashes with shame. For years I was a homophobe and sowed hatred for myself. Self-hate speech. A monologue of hate. It wasn't until I stopped drinking that I began to like myself.

Passage 2: I am a faggot, and so I have a faggot's duties: the heavier they are and the more I feel compelled to perform them, the wiser the person I become. For the more my spirit lives the collective life of the community, the dearer and more precious this life becomes to me, and the stronger is my need to care for and nurture its wholeness. On the other hand, the higher the level of my moral development, the more I'm guided by self-love. On the lower levels of morality, a person's behaviour towards their fellow humans—unless it stems from benevolence towards them—depends solely on the fear of retaliation, of punishment, whether in this life or in the next. However, as civilisation progresses, increasingly higher forms of self-love guide our morality. A civilised person does not act in a despicable manner primarily because they respect themselves. This self-respect also generates an appropriate attitude to one's own faggotry. The sense of dignity that keeps someone from stealing or begging also prevents one from enjoying the benefits of faggotry without adding to it, without working to defend and improve it. Everything that is faggoty is mine: I cannot renounce anything. I am free to be proud of what is great in faggotry, but I must also accept the shame that is brought about by what is meagre in it.

Passage 3: Code-switching comes out right away. Your language will betray you, more than your clothes and neglected fingernails. But when you live in a society that has no words to describe you, you start to wonder if you're alive at all. Your feelings do not exist, and neither do your dreams and desires. You don't exist, you're just a mistake, a glitch in the system. This has been the story of multitudes before me, throughout history since the dawn of mankind. Only the sanctions changed: once you could be killed, or banished forever from your community, your only safe home. When you are 17, or 19, or 22 and everything seems like the ultimate tragedy, rejection is the worst thing that can happen to you. You're a misfit, you're nothing, you don't count, you're a weirdo, a clown, an eccentric. An abomination. You bring shame upon your home and your family, and for that nothing good will ever happen to you. There'll be punishments, karma, sin, call it what you will. Your life will be a living hell. I finally find the word and grind it in my mouth, try it on my tongue: gay. Lesbian. The very worst

word of them all—cunt, ass, dick, pussy, all milder than that. The shameful spectacles begin, and shame is always accompanied by loneliness. When you're a child and then a teenager, you don't yet know that you're not completely alone. And at the same time you're like all the rest of us. Like everyone else, I received gifts associated with my birthplace and social class: a Catholic upbringing and soldiers from Westerplatte, who marched to heaven in fours.[15] This placed me in an awkward position. I could no longer march hand in hand with them because I was a pervert, a deviant, who no longer had any claim to the things that shaped me: to Poland, to patriotism. Living a double life inevitably led to a split in my personality. In the past, I saved myself by going to confession. I could no longer lay the blame for my self-hatred either on the church or on Poland, although I'd love to justify myself again with those scapegoats, even though they're already down on the ground and everyone is spitting in their mouths and kicking them in the ribs. Apparently you don't kick a man when he's down, even if the man is a serial killer.

22nd April 2011. Coming Out. Radom

First I came out to my high school friends. They thought it was a phase, that it would pass. Then—to my university friends in Lublin, who were the first to give me the acceptance I craved so much. Then to my younger brother, who had a lot of questions he never asked and has carried his anger for many years. Then to my youngest brother, who took the news with ease, characteristic of the Generation Z he belongs to. I had been in a relationship for a year by then, and was living in Gdańsk. I was going to visit my family for Easter and finally tell my parents. Both about the fact that I was a lesbian and that I wouldn't be going to church any more, because the church had hurt me, taken away the joy of my own feelings and the right to experience them. I wasn't afraid that my parents would kick me out of the house, disinherit me or stop talking to me. That was something I was never afraid of, and in that sense I was in a much more privileged position than hundreds of other young people in my situation. But I dreaded other things. I was afraid that they'd start blaming my being

15 *Kiedy się wypełniły dni/i przyszło zginąć latem,/prosto do nieba czwórkami szli/żołnierze z Westerplatte* (When days were counted/and summer cast a deathly shade/straight into heaven they went four by four/the soldiers of Westerplatte)—a stanza from Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński's poem "Pieśń o żołnierzach z Westerplatte" (Hymn to the Soldiers of Westerplatte, written in 1939) commemorating the unit defending Westerplatte, a Polish fort at the mouth of the Dead Vistula in the Free City of Gdańsk, in the early days of the Nazi invasion in 1939. Westerplatte has since become synonymous with the idealised valour of true Polish patriots.

different on their mistakes in parenting, I was afraid that they might not understand it and that I wouldn't be able to explain it to them (at the time I still wasn't able to, and I made a lot of mistakes that thirty-two-year-old me wouldn't make any more. But back then I didn't have the language and the awareness that I have today). I was afraid that they wouldn't be proud of me anymore. I wanted to assume the role of a parent in order to protect them from the news, but I was the one who needed looking after at the time. I was right: Mum and Dad didn't disown me. They assured me of their love and that they wanted me to be happy. I was lucky; such a reaction is, unfortunately, extremely rare. But coming out made our relationship more difficult, not easier. It was only then that the free-fall ride began. Only then did the consequences of coming out of the closet hit me. I uttered the word and in that exact moment I began to hate myself. The self-loathing was so acute that it overshadowed every other emotion. So, I'm a lesbian. I was twenty-two years old, no longer a child, but I still knew very little about how the world worked. I immediately started apologising to everyone for what I was. I was literally apologising for it. I didn't want anyone to feel offended. I was suffering. I and my loved ones. I came out symbolically, on Good Friday, a day which was very important to me, a Catholic girl. When I was little, the Paschal Triduum was a very emotional event for me, because that's when the greatest possible sacrifice was being made—Jesus giving his life for our sins. Then, for the first time in my conscious life, I did not attend church on Good Friday. After that, the story progressed quickly. Saying it out loud didn't help at all. It had no liberating power, it wasn't a moment that made everything easier. That's not how it works; it wasn't a film. On the contrary, suddenly everything became more difficult. Had my parents kicked me out, I might at least have been able to build my identity on a negative, on opposing an angry, intolerant couple who rejected their own child, proving that they never actually loved her but only their image of her. Loving but uneducated parents were a challenge I didn't know how to take on. I was uneducated myself. So all I had left was shame. Always, eternally ashamed. After all, I couldn't lie, I couldn't dodge questions or dismiss them with vague hints, I couldn't dwell on the shores of understatement, I couldn't feed my surroundings with ambiguity. Everything up to that point consisted of safe open forms, in which I hid. Now that I had defined who I was, I had to become that person and assume responsibility for it. Responsibility was the thing I wanted least of in the world. God should've changed my name, just as he changed the name of Abram and Sarai, of Jacob and Simon, and of Saul. A new name meant a new life, a new mission. With a new name

I could arrange my life all over again, run away once more, meet new people who hadn't known me before my conversion. But my name remained unchanged. I didn't know how to be a lesbian, knew nothing about being one. I learned everything through a long and painstaking process, and nothing came naturally to me. None of my previous skins had had time to fully grow before I had to shed them and put on a new one. I am a lesbian. And suddenly all the other things that I've been up until now disappear: daughter, nerd, record collector, granddaughter. I've become a lesbian.

(The disappearing experiment is a very simple one: "That's her, her name is Ania, and she's, you know. A lesbian." And so Ania is no more.)

I didn't know the culture I was now supposed to belong to, and I didn't know that I would be going back to my childhood in a way, that I would have to learn everything all over again. A new language, a new system of references. Only I didn't really want to change anything. Confessing the truth didn't make things any different, except that my shame became more overt and my love more hidden. I lived my life so as not to offend anyone with my lesbianism. I was a coward. Today I am ashamed of my shame.

For years, I harboured the belief that because I was a lesbian, and not a beautiful or rich one, I had a different kind of duty. The duty to have a perfect relationship, an incredible love that no one has ever had or will ever have. I harboured the belief that I had to show the whole world how great and valuable this love was, so that absolutely no one would have any doubts about the genuineness of a lesbian relationship. Every slip--up in my relationship, every failure, gave me a two-fold sense of guilt: towards Her and towards the whole world. On that Good Friday, the day which was supposed to bring me comfort, my life broke up into two hypocritical halves and I looked on indifferent, maybe even happy that I had managed to fool everyone once more. On that Good Friday, I told some truth (I'm a lesbian), some lies (it's my fault), and I failed to mention the main point (that I don't know what to do or how to deal with it all). After that, I wasn't myself, either with Her or at home.

28th September 2010. Łódź

It was September, seven in the morning. A cold wind was blowing and it was raining. I was wearing a grey sweatshirt and put a hoodie on top, and I was getting soaked while I smoked a cigarette. I was standing at the tram stop near Manufaktura.[16] I saw a tall girl walk up to a petite blonde and drum

16 Manufaktura is a major retail centre in Łódź, located in a historic industrial section of the city.

her perfect fingers on the other girl's umbrella. A tram was approaching, and I thought: "You can still escape. You can get on that tram and never come back. You don't know her yet." The girl with the umbrella turned around and the tall one blushed. Then she looked at me. I looked at her. We recognised each other. There was no turning back at that point. She invited me to have breakfast in a flat where the floor was trembling. Her sister was also there, which surprised me. Then the sister got up and left for an exam. We were left alone. I was left alone with a girl who kept quiet. We drank beer and listened to our favourite songs. When "Purple Rain" started, all I could think about was kissing her. I didn't know how to do it. I couldn't bring myself to it, couldn't lean towards her. Then she kissed me. The ground trembled again. We made love. She was about to move to Gdańsk for university. I was to return to Lublin. But I knew I couldn't let her go. I wanted to stay with her forever.

This is how I met my current girlfriend. My partner. I'd like to say "wife," because we're the age for it, but I can't. Not here.

Gdańsk. 2010–2017

We settled in the Tricity. Far from my parents, far from my friends. Far from her family. In the beginning we tried to establish relationships among "insiders"; she did better, I did worse. I wasn't used to lesbian clubs (of which there were very few at the time, and which had been hit by the crisis and were closing down. *Fufu* in Łódź, where she once took me, was my first time in a lesbian bar), I didn't know anyone who openly identified as queer. Entering the community was very difficult and in a way traumatising for me. They were mostly kids, my age or younger, with a lot of problems, complexes stemming from rejection, lack of acceptance, their own bodies. I, too, had complexes and insecurities, and felt that I didn't fit in anywhere—neither in my old milieu nor in my new one—after coming out. Like in that song by Hey, "too stupid for the smart and too smart for the stupid," and so on.[17] I was too young to understand nuances such as how the number of sexual partners boosts self-esteem, or how clubs are the only safe place for them (I used to say them, instead of us). I got into a serious relationship very early on. I quickly dropped out of participating in our community, but my girlfriend didn't want to drop out, she wanted to know people who were queer like us. I was jealous, possessive,

17 *Za mądra dla głupich/a dla mądrych zbyt głupia*—a lyric from the song "Cudzoziemka w raju kobiet" (Odd Woman in a Women's Paradise) from the 2001 album *[sic!]* by Polish alternative rock band Hey. The lyrics (by frontwoman Katarzyna Nosowska) play on the often mutually contradictory social expectations toward women.

worried that acquaintances would drag her into a life that I wasn't suited to. She had already been meeting girls in clubs, had already lived that life. Because I didn't fit into either a rainbow community or a heteronormative one, I closed myself off more and more. All my friendships were suddenly crumbling, I didn't nurture them, I didn't pay enough attention to them. The coming out changed nothing in my life, my interests, my appearance. I felt that it wasn't natural, that I was forcibly holding back the transition because I didn't really want to fall out of the heteronorm, I wasn't ready for it. When I came home (less and less often, eventually only on holidays), I pretended to live with my girlfriend the way I would live with a boyfriend, as if nothing had changed. Of course, none of my aunts, uncles, mum's work colleagues or dad's work pals knew about the eldest daughter. When someone asked why Ola had moved to Gdańsk, they explained that she was studying and then working. They dismissed questions about a boyfriend: she still has time. First I was 25, then 30. During our last year in Gdańsk, my younger brother and his wife visited me. I had already been in a relationship for almost seven years, my girlfriend had been to my family home many times, and it wasn't their first visit. I don't have the right words to describe the moment, but a horrible, disgusting argument broke out. It started with him saying that my girlfriend looked masculine (not true, but she certainly doesn't conform, if she doesn't want to, to the male gaze) and asking why. Instead of standing up for her or asking him why it mattered, why he was even bringing it up, I started explaining it/us. Then we started talking about our youngest brother and his girlfriend, who was pregnant at the time, and my brother said she was more family than my girlfriend. Than my partner of 7 years. The whole thing ended with smashed plates and them leaving. But most of all it ended in a fight between us. A huge, terrible argument. My girlfriend was right, I didn't stand up for her. I was ashamed of who I was, I tried to "not be a topic," I tried to pretend that it was nothing special after all, even though I didn't think so myself. That evening, even though its memory causes me pain, changed something in me. Ten years after I first kissed a girl, seven years after I began a relationship, I realised what was wrong with me. What ailed me was shame, permanent Catholic guilt towards my family. I would rather sacrifice my identity and my partner's sense of self-worth in our relationship than draw a line and say: my relationship is just as good as any of your relationships and you must treat it with the same respect. I was 29 at the time, no longer a little girl, quite the opposite. At my age, my mother already had three children. And that was the turning point in my growing into who I became. I could continue to cower,

to be ashamed, to hide, to pretend I didn't exist, or I could finally tell myself and the people around me the truth about myself. I chose myself, I chose to be a lesbian, to be queer. I didn't choose my sexual orientation, because it can't be picked out like that, but I chose my own maturity in who I am. I haven't been ashamed once since that day, even though the attacks on gays, lesbians, and other queer people increase week by week, fuelled by daft propaganda, misinformation, and just plain scaremongering by top-level politicians. I come out to everyone I meet, although of course I don't do it in the first sentence. I feel that I may be, for some people, the first non-heteronormative person they've met (that they know of). So I say that I'm a lesbian and have been in a relationship for many years. I'm a lesbian, I shop at Biedronka[18] like you, I have Netflix like you, I go to work like you, I pay taxes like you. If I have the same responsibilities as a citizen of this country, which I conscientiously fulfil, why don't I have the same rights? Obviously, I don't want to sexualise your child or teach it how to masturbate; I think the child will learn it on his own. Every day I try to be an OK person so that no one can say: that stupid, boorish, rude, mean lesbian. I've learned to talk about my sexual orientation with my parents and my brothers. However, I wonder about one thing. I have the tools to do it, I'm an intelligent, educated woman from a big city who received a great deal of education in my own home, in addition to knowledge acquired from state schools. I've read dozens of books and articles on all the topics that interest me. I have grown as a person. What about the kids who don't have these cognitive or intellectual tools? Who will tell them, in their language, about what they're going through and how at least to protect themselves from intolerance, hatred, violence or—equally cruel—loneliness. We can have our big-city discussions, do our PhDs, and preach to the converted, but what about those kids? Who will help them? Perhaps it should be me. I was there, too, once upon a time, a long time ago.

2017–2020. Katowice. Fatigue

The rising tide of intolerance in the last few years has made me extremely tired. I've also cried many times out of rage. No one should cry because of politicians; I used to think I was above that. After moving to Katowice I graduated and got a "decent" job in a "decent" company. I haven't met a single person in this city who is gay, lesbian, non-binary, queer. I didn't seek them out, but I also just didn't see them. I didn't out

18 Biedronka—see n. 4 on p. 144.

myself in that workplace. In part because I knew the majority's views on LGBT, so my main emotion was fear—not of rejection, just of becoming the subject of office gossip. I was different anyway, I had my nails done wrong, my size wrong, I didn't meet some of the criteria of femininity that are important to people, although I never felt bad about my gender. I've never wanted to identify differently, either because I'm a lesbian or for any other reason. I'm a feminist (a word that has become perverted in public discourse even more than lesbian) and believe that I share a gender-specific experience with other women, and at the same time I believe that we each have the right to choose and live as we wish. The second reason I didn't come out in my new job was that I didn't feel like going beyond a working relationship with any of my co-workers. I feel, when I take a cross-sectional look at my life and experience, that my orientation isolates me. To be honest, I have to admit that people on the whole find me likeable. I'm baby-faced, I'm quite funny, I don't harm or hurt anyone. But I can see how the outlook changes when I say who I really am, what my life is really like. It's hard at work in general. When I started working, I used to make up boyfriends. I'm ashamed of it now, but to get through the long boring office hours and to have some way out of the trap of the "fiancé" questions, I made up a boyfriend. He had all the qualities of my girlfriend and worked in her profession, only his name was Marek. It worked, up to a certain point. Then I started to work in the court, one of the places where the women who managed to survive the 90s usually work and make it to retirement in jobs where no one will fire them. These ladies liked me—I was the youngest there—so I used to run around getting them smokes and coffee milk and fixing their computers. I'd decided on a rule of no bullshit. But "no more bullshit" is not the same as telling the truth. Older, more experienced, I handled the subject of my "fiancé" better. I made friends with A., who is 15 years older than me, and she was the first person I told about who I was. She was initially surprised, yet displayed a lot of care, acceptance, and love for me. In the next department I worked in, the situation was reversed: we were all young there. Twenty-year-olds confined to a small space in a very stressful job. There, too, I didn't say who I was right away, but I told everyone eventually and was never given any overt grief (at least not because of that.) We went out for beers after work, we partied. We worked very close to the beach. It was summer. We were drinking. One of my office colleagues drunkenly leaned over me in the club and said: "I want to kiss you." And she did kiss me, in front of the whole office. Lykke Li was booming in the speakers. The next day I seriously considered

taking a leave of absence on demand, both because of the hangover and the embarrassment. I reasoned, however, that she was the one wearing the ring on her finger and that she, just like me, would prefer to keep it quiet. That didn't happen; we had an affair (I don't like that word, which is trite and fits American rom-coms, not real life) that lasted about six months and almost ended in divorce. I changed jobs. I was going to do it anyway, but this situation only hastened my decision. That's why in Katowice, at my new job, in a new place, I didn't want to be the subject of gossip, or a field for experimentation, or just reduced to my orientation. On the other hand, I was terribly sorry that I couldn't talk about O., my girlfriend, who is funny, clever, warm, and beautiful, in the way my colleagues talked about their partners, wives, husbands.

I don't know if there's a lot of talk about sex in my circles, because I've pointed out many times that I don't belong there, at my own request; and now that I could belong, and even want to, I feel that somehow it's too late for that. What I do know for a fact is that me and my friends, two girls I managed to keep in touch with from my student days in Lublin, talk about sex a lot. Sometimes I wish I had a lesbian friend to talk to about it, a person other than my girlfriend, my partner. But I turn to my female friends for that. The sexual experiences we have are obviously different if you reduce them to just mechanics, but on an emotional level, the desires, the dislikes, the frequency, the problems involved, these are very similar. Girls, women, talk about sex; I talk about sex and I see that we're on about the same thing. About pleasure, yes. But also about intimacy, which in bed can be exceptional. And this has nothing to do with sexual orientation.

For me, as a lesbian, *The L Word* on TV was the most important thing in terms of pop-culture. I personally never watched the series on Polish television, but saw it first in 2010 and then returned to it many times. The show is not without its flaws, like many cultural texts of the time (it was broadcast between 2004 and 2009), but it was formative for generations of lesbians. I'm already overlooking the fact that *The L Word* was created by women, and mostly non-heteronormative women, but it depicted a spectrum of lesbians, their stories, their coming to self-awareness, relationships, love, sex. There were women who wanted to marry and raise children, there were those who would never have chosen a lesbian reenactment of a straight life, there were monogamists and those who had problems with fidelity, younger women, older women. Sure, they were all beautiful and overwhelmingly white, but television is a fantasy of sorts, so today I wave that off. What's most important about

it: it showed that a woman can love a woman in different ways, that sex between two women is beautiful, passionate, and interesting, that you can have different values and still be a lesbian. It was a landmark series in American television, featuring lesbian icons, lesbian bands, lesbian actresses, and for Polish lesbians my age and older, the bootleg torrent versions of it were almost our Bible. Everyone wanted to be Shane or go to bed with Shane, and the language of the series became an integral part of the environment. I'm curious to know if the next generation of girls watch it too and what their take on it is. For me, it was a revelation, my first big TV moment of enlightenment. And confirmation that girls and women like me really do exist. I got the series burned on DVDs by M, a friend from high school. She didn't add a single word of commentary, but simply said: "Watch it."

2nd October 2020. Katowice-Kraków

I am moving once again. First I moved from my hometown of Radom to Lublin. Then from Lublin to Kraków for a month, but I came back; I was in love with a friend from university, but I never told her about it. Then from Lublin to Gdańsk. Then from Gdańsk to London and back to Gdańsk again. Then from Gdańsk to Katowice, and now—from Katowice to Kraków. I am coming full circle, the significance of which is known only to me. I moved out for the sake of love and now I'm doing it for the sake of love again, but that love is out in the open and I'm proud of it. In London my girlfriend and I felt a real transformation. There we were open from the first day to the last. There, we walked around the city holding hands and nobody ever said anything or looked at us in an unpleasant way. In Poland, depending on the city, the neighbourhood, and the time of day, things were different. Mostly scary, once funny: during a walk in Warsaw, a girl, about 12 years old, rode past us on a bicycle and sighed in a bored tone: "Jeez, again with the dykes."

I regret that I wasn't sure of who I was back in high school. Before that, in primary and middle school it would've been too early for that, I was too much of a mess. But in high school, I could already have my first crushes, love affairs, and feel at ease with them. It wasn't until my third year of university that I finally and directly came out to the people closest to me. My family and two female friends. The moment of recognising myself was a bit like something out of Leśmian's "Meadow" (or maybe I only think so because the poem was recited by a girl I fancied a lot, and I can still remember what she was wearing and how she looked, even though 13 years have passed):

Once, having been called by my name
I glimpsed myself in a stream,
I shall recognise myself among the great expanse.[19]

Recognising myself was both terrible and terribly good. The shame, the cathartic guilt, the complexe—they took an awful lot out of my health and my life, but today I'm happy and proud. I foolishly and childishly thought that coming out would straighten up my life, my self-esteem and my family. It made them even more twisted, but now things are OK.

I used to be a great believer, and my faith was sincere; it came from deep within. I believed that God held answers to my questions. Today, I don't believe in anything.

I deeply regret that I don't have queer friends, but it was my own wish to remove myself from all that, and my hetero friends respect me, love me and don't cut me any slack.

I am upset that I cannot legally marry the woman I love. That's why we perform a different kind of nuptials in each subsequent place we live. I discovered this a few days ago. I was very grumpy, at the age of 32, when a new tooth started erupting and I whined an awful lot. My girlfriend asked me to go to a Żabka[20] store with her, so we could talk some more about a book on the way (we were reading *Pustostany* by Dorota Kotas at the time[21]; once in a while we read a book aloud together, that's how we spend time with each other), and I grumpily replied: no, I don't want to, give me a break. But then I felt stupid, got dressed, and went with her. We bought what we were supposed to buy, we were standing at the checkout and it's always the same thing, every time, in every shop. We put our joint groceries on the counter and the cashier asks: do we want to pay together. To which we agree: we do. I gather up my shopping, suddenly stop on the pavement outside and say: I know why you wanted us to go to the shop together. Because every time we move to a new place (and we move often), we go to the new Żabka near our house and we do the Żabka Wedding there: the lady asks if we shop together and we say WE DO in unison. The "we do" we can afford in Poland. I've always known that the law in

19 *Zawołana po imieniu/Raz przejrzałam się w strumieniu—/I odtąd poznam siebie wśród reszty przestworu*. Bolesław Leśmian (see n. 9 on p. 56) wrote "The Meadow" in 1920.

20 Żabka—see n. 6 on p. 145.

21 Dorota Kotas, *Pustostany* (Empty Houses; Warszawa 2019). This popular and critically acclaimed autobiographical novel tells the story of a lesbian protagonist squatting in a Warsaw tenement house who strives to live as far from capitalism as she can. Kotas' second novel, *Cukry* (Carbohydrates, published in 2021), draws back to the authors' experiences growing up non-heteronormative and non-neurotypical in a small town outside of Warsaw.

Poland doesn't keep up, but capitalism married us long ago, and everything is sanctified by the sacrament of shopping. We buy together = we are together. Capitalism accepts payment and doesn't care that we're both girls. When we finally decide to buy a flat, we will also take out a loan together and then no one will care either. Politicians like to look into our flats, our bedrooms, our lives, when it has a propaganda effect. But when it comes to buying and selling, no one gives a shit.

These are, of course, jokes I make with clenched teeth. I wish I could call her my wife. And that's it. This is my sole dream today. We own little, but we don't need more, except for not feeling like second-class citizens. Hey, we didn't choose to be born in Poland either.

But I'm happy anyway—I'm happy that I stopped being ashamed, that I'm finally proud of who I am. And no government, no homophobe, no human being will ever take that pride away from me again, because I worked for that feeling for a very long time.

Contents

		Preface	I
		Introduction: Black Spangles	III
		Contest Guidance	XXIX
1		[*For those of us...*]	1
2	DOMA	My Dear Lesbian Diary!	17
3	MARCIN		39
4	ADA ŁANIEWICZ	Diary of a Lesbian from a County Town	51
5		Angelism	85
6		[Before]	98
7	MIA	Uncaged	103
8	TOSIA	kToś(ka)	108
9	ANDRZEJ	Apples with mustard	121
10	NINA		128
11		A Small Town Diary	151
12	ŁUKASZ		155
13	MAX PIEKART	If Only Mum Knew	159
14	ANNA NADAR, "BUN"	Against the Grain	210
15	ALEKSANDRA PUCIŁOWSKA		302
16	TOMASZ JANOTA	History of a transgender person	306
17	TOM(ASZ) SZOSTEK	10 Years in Canada	314
18	MAGDA		316
19	KORDIAN	A Diary	322
20	KINGA KOSIŃSKA	Greetings from My Loneliness	328
21	L. TYBERIUSZ OLSZEWSKI	About a Boy Who Doesn't Exist	341
22	BARTŁOMIEJ DĘBNIAK		362
23	OLGA GÓRSKA	Memories of Growing Up. Excerpts	372