

LAY IT OUT

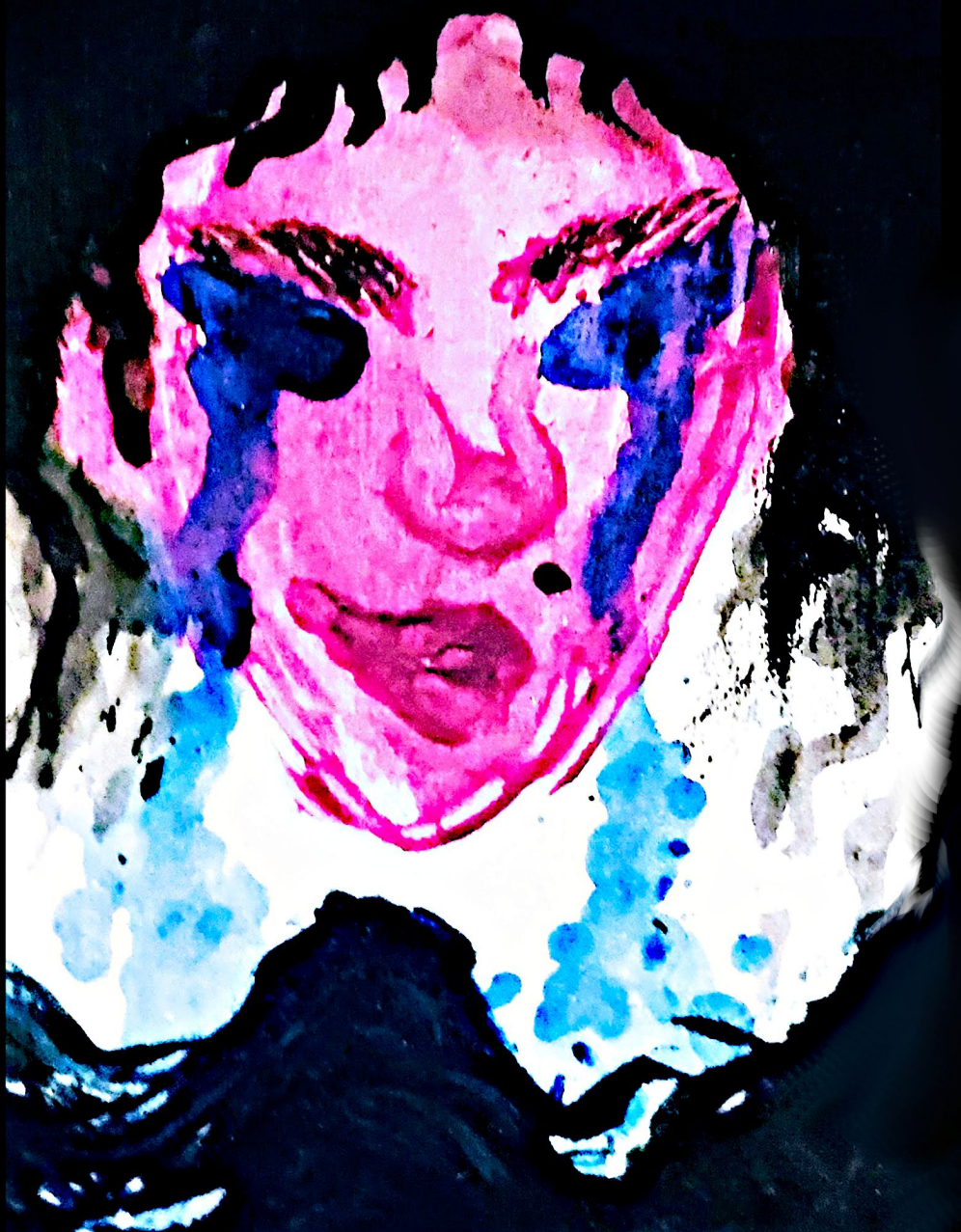
A magazine for cool people

Issue Five

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The war on women

a look at how women continue to be subjected to
oppression around the world



ALSO FEATURING

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king Rico Tourky-Brille

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rocking the world

PLUS ART, POETRY AND MORE
FROM AROUND THE WORLD

Spring has Sprung! The world is bringing forth new life; bees fill my garden, and my kittens keep chasing them and getting stung. Tulips are out. The sun is slowly creeping out from behind a cloud and temperatures are rising above an arctic level.

There is a lot of goodness in the world. But there are many things that still need solved. Speaking of rising temperatures, thousands of scientists over the world protested the main companies funding fossil fuel use. They risked their careers to try and protect the future of the world. Though it took a while for the media to catch up to the story, and while it is not being focused on as much as it should be, at least more people are waking up to reality.

There is much tragedy too. In Ireland, two bright gay men were brutally murdered in Sligo. There is nowhere near the public outcry there should be. But vigils across the country show a community that insists on survival. In the north of Ireland, the founding of an LGBTQ+ inclusive GAA club was on the front page of one of the major newspapers. We have so far to go, but we are on the way there.

Ukrainians are still being murdered indiscriminately, women raped and treated as disposable targets, to disrupt the men of the country's morale. But millions are escaping and being welcomed in their new homes in the UK and across Europe. Russia will soon be unable to continue their war as sanctions and the military might of the Ukrainians take their toll. It is important to remember that these sanctions hurt ordinary people most. A beautiful person who sells vintage postcards is going to have their entire Etsy shop destroyed; an archive of nearly a decade. For living in the wrong country. Please spare a thought for them and the thousands of Russians now in prison for protest.

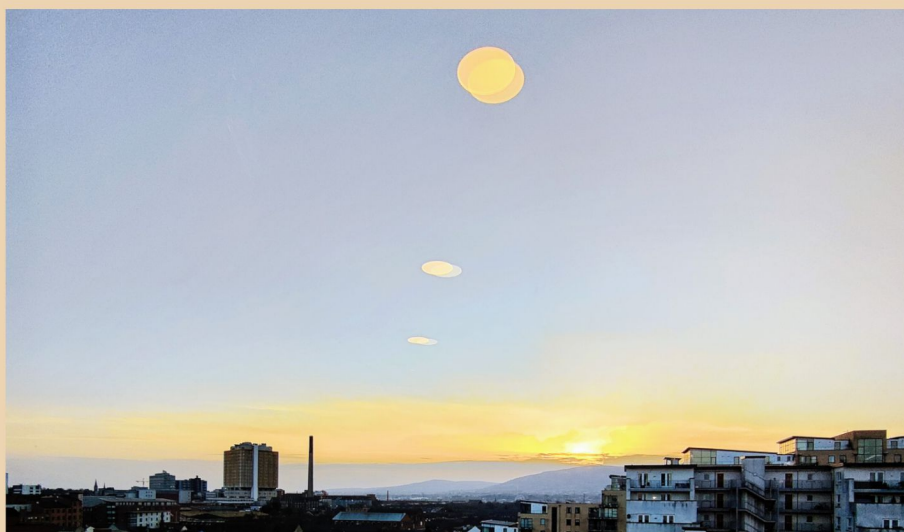
And now for some good news. Workers in the US have won major union rights. New York Amazon employees, led by Christian Smalls, won their right to organise. Of course, Amazon are now cracking down. And the fight ahead will be harder. But the people will not give up. Five Starbucks stores in Virginia have voted to unionise. If all these workers achieve their goals, then wages and labour conditions for all will improve.

Campaigns for weed reform are sweeping across the United States which would allow people to self-medicate and live more comfortably, without fear of persecution and inhumane prison sentences.

A new bacterial spray will hopefully reduce agricultural waste and improve the soil. A new 'artificial pancreas' treatment is providing hope to those suffering with diabetes. French company Glowee plans to light up streets using bioluminescence instead of wasting electricity at night. German company Sono Motors are partnering with public transport in Munich to create a solar powered bus. Another bacteria, eating methane, may convert greenhouse gas emissions into fuel.

So the world has some good moments. We can have a great future. We must still fight for it, and create a society worth fighting for. But as this issue will hopefully suggest, there are plenty of people changing the world for the better, and amidst the real issues we have not ignored, we can still hope.

Take care of yourselves, and take care of each other.



Necole Hines While Crossing Hurdles & Proceeding With Her Love For Cooking and Cannabis

Interviewed by Sonali Roy

Nature has blessed us variously. We are indebted to her to a great extent- say of oxygen, the green, or the blue. Nature serves as our friend, philosopher, guide, and fostering mother at the same time. She puts us to test and prepares for the winning platform too for those surviving the struggle for existence. The entire animal kingdom has been investing several arresting efforts to survive since the dawn of civilization. There were many and are still many advocating green building and sustainability to save the planet and its biodiversity along with climate changes receiving constant challenges and threats. One such attempt is cooking & infusing with cannabis. No, the trend is not a new one. But, stigma haunts whenever you speak of cannabis, which, though with medicinal properties, is prohibited in many parts of the world. And the mark of disgrace towards cannabis users has become an age-old fashion, which is not easy to get rid of just within a single day. Cannabis users are sometimes cornered; they feel detached. But, time changes, and feelings and experience of people also change with the flowing time. Moreover, colour and sex matter much in the God-gifted planet!

So, what you have to do is proceed gradually. And one such consequence of the gradual movement is that some developed countries legalized cannabis usage in compliance with regulations in respect to doses, manufacturing, channelling, sales, purchasing, and using cannabis either for therapeutic or recreational purposes.

Now, let's meet Necole Hines of Jamaica now residing in Canada. She is a self-taught cannabis chef, but holds on certificates in cannathery and cannabis sommelier- level 1. Growing up with Jamaican parentage, Hines was familiar with Rastafarianism and the communities approach to cannabis and ita cooking. Ita cooking is the traditional Jamaican cuisine celebrated without meat, salt, and additives..

A former food entrepreneur, Hines, turned to a cannabis chef and educator. Her combined love for cooking and cannabis led her come to the industry. Hines says, "I'm a former food entrepreneur that combined my love for cooking & cannabis to become a cannabis chef and educator." Hines's kitchen rooms low THC infused oils, butter, and honey for preparing for the easy-to-cook Jamaican-inspired recipes, which don't consume much time. And while cooking with cannabis, she takes microdose approach. Many people prefer eating cannabis with brownies, gummies, and cookies. .

But, Hines wanted to normalize adult cannabis use. So, she created infused savoury dishes and entered the cannabis scene. She states, "Historically, cannabis was used in the same fashion, for both sweet & savoury." She further adds, "Historically, cannabis has been used in cooking as a seasoning in Khmer food in Uzbekistan or added to Cambodian sweet treats like "joy porridge" made from almond butter, cannabis, spices, honey, and sugar." She uses various methods to infuse oils, butter, and honey for cooking though also trying out a new infusion machine using a Sous Vide Immersion Circulator and enjoying several other products in the market as well. She very much likes infusing with coconut oil for its versatile nature and saturated fats. Hines describes, "Coconut oil enhances smoothies, hot beverages, rice dishes, chutneys, and dressings so beautifully." She carries on, "I like to make infused apple-pear chutney with dried cranberries, ginger, and infused coconut oil. It's a wonderful addition to your breakfast granola & yogurt or slice of pie. To infuse cannabis is with a slow cooker & oven. This process is fairly easy and great for adults new to cannabis or experienced consumers new to cooking with it."

Hines loves adding cannabis to her life in every way she can. Indeed, after a car accident changed her life, she decided to go for pain management with the healing properties of cannabis. She realizes, "As I began to approach my cannabis use with a therapeutic lens, I quickly learned that it can be used in so many ways." Hines shares, "My favourite way to consume is to roll & smoke a joint...I'm old school that way. But now I also love to infuse oils to make topicals, add to my morning tea and cook delicious meals with."

In 2021, Hines founded **Faded Living** with an intention to wipe out the mark of disgrace associated with adult cannabis consumption. She explains, "I continue to show gratitude for the healing benefits and balance this magical plant gives me. Naturally, I decided to combine my passions for cannabis & cooking to found Faded Living."

A passionate cook and advocate, Hines, now offers workshops on cooking with cannabis. She describes, "I founded Faded Living, (a cannabis education and events company) to normalize adult cannabis use and help break down the stereotypes through cooking workshops, a weekly podcast, ebooks, apparel and infused dining."

She continues, "My workshops are developed with a micro dose approach, perfect for new cannabis users or experienced users new to cooking with it."

But, life has thorns too. Among plenty of reasons, racism, sexism, and financial crisis sometimes pervades the lives of good people. Similar things have happened to Hines. She finds it too much difficult to become a cannabis entrepreneur though residing in Canada, where cannabis is legal both for medicinal and recreational purposes for adults. Hines explains,

"Although I reside in Canada where cannabis is federally legal in both the medical and adult-use markets, becoming a cannabis entrepreneur involves many hurdles." She shares, "After I got incorporated, it took several months to secure a bank account and even longer to set up payment processing." Hines realizes that getting into the cannabis industry is expensive too thus creating barriers for people from marginalized communities.

Lack of diversity in the Canadian cannabis space filled her with utter despair, and she co-founded **Louder Together Cannabis Advocacy Society**, a not for profit organization dedicated to amplifying & supporting the voices of BIPOC in the cannabis industry.

It is her passion for the cannabis plant that allows her to create a 420 lifestyle that brings balance, wellness, enlightenment, and change.

Hines is ambitious and dreams, "I look forward to a day where I can easily frequent restaurants & consumption lounges with delicious cannabis-infused menus."

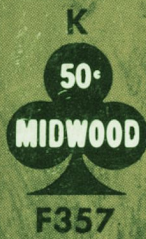


Credit to Ellevate Management Inc.

For more about Necole and her journey, listen to her podcast **Faded Living & Friends** and visit her website fadedliving.com



Check out Faded Living merch at fadedliving.com/shop



WHERE THERE'S SMOKE

THERE IS A JOINT



ENJOY 420 RESPONSIBLY -- WEED DOESN'T WORK FOR EVERYONE
BUT IF IT DOES, THEN BLAZE UP

ALL EYES ON ME

By Matthew O'Brien

Matthew O'Brien is a journalist and social worker who has been considered the foremost authority on homelessness in the Las Vegas storm drains for the past 15 years. As managing editor of the Las Vegas alternative weekly newspaper CityLife, he co-wrote a series on the issue in 2002. It went viral and received national media attention. In 2004, he began work on a book about the subject, 'Beneath the Neon: Life and Death in the Tunnels of Las Vegas,' a collection of gritty narratives exposing the dark side of Las Vegas.

In 2009, O'Brien founded Shine a Light, a not-for-profit organization that provides food, clothing, housing and counseling services to those in the drains. Through his outreach work and as a guide for visiting journalists, he has continued to visit the tunnels and assist people seeking paths out of homelessness. These inspiring stories, which O'Brien would have never envisioned when he first went underground in 2002, led him to conduct interviews for a new book collecting voices of hope and recovery forged from deep despair.

O'Brien is also the author of 'My Week at the Blue Angel,' a collection of narrative journalism. He has a master of fine arts degree in creative writing from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and a Silver Pen (mid-career award) from the Nevada Writers Hall of Fame.

His latest book 'Dark Days, Bright Nights: Surviving the Las Vegas Storm Drains' is available now.

The hinged, metal grate that covered the mouth of the underground flood channel opened with a squeal, and a man emerged from the shadows of the tunnel. He closed the grate behind him, as if it were a door, and began down an open channel strewn with debris.

The sun was setting behind the tunnel, silhouetting nightclub and restaurant billboards and the Venetian and Mirage resorts. Six feet tall, thin, and muscular, "Flash," as the man was known on the streets, was dwarfed by the backdrop. He had dark, spiky hair and wore plastic, rectangular sunglasses, a black T-shirt, denim shorts, and white sneakers sans socks. A silver chain clipped to one of his belt loops snaked into his front pocket. Scabs covered his arms and legs, making his faded, improvised tattoos all the more cryptic. A spider web or volcano obscured his elbow.

With a square jaw shaded by stubble and chapped, bloody lips, Flash walked gingerly, head down. He navigated a bend in the channel, then angled up the embankment and, face contorting, shimmied through a fissure in the chain-link fence. After crossing a deserted, sandy lot and stepping over a concrete barrier, he soon found himself at the intersection of Spring Mountain Road and the Las Vegas Strip. He paused to survey his surroundings: the terracotta-orange Treasure Island and its artificial bay and three-mast pirate ship; wide, gridlocked streets; equally congested sidewalks, where every pedestrian toted a drink or shopping bag.

The pause appeared to be the most difficult thing Flash had done up to that point. He was in pain, but anxious. His body was reluctant, his mind raced. As the Spring Mountains swallowed the sun, and the neon and LED lights flickered to life, he blinked and twitched. He then started south on the Strip.

Eyes, cell phones, security cameras—they're all on me, he thought, as beads of sweat formed on his forehead. They want a show? I'll put one on for 'em. Better than Cirque—and free. Like Tupac said, all eyes on me.

He strutted down the sidewalk, parting the stream of pedestrians. Turning toward the bay, he froze mid-stride and lowered the shades, revealing his bloodshot, green-brown eyes.

Is that you, baby?

A week ago, Flash and his girlfriend of seven years, Grace, were asleep in the tunnel. A wall of water slammed into their secondhand, queen-sized mattress, which sprawled across the concrete floor. As they frisked in the dark, attempting to salvage a few prized possessions (their cell phones, clothes, and wallet and purse), a second wave hit them and carried Grace away. Flash swam after her. She was conscious and they were communicating, but he couldn't drag her to dry land. The water was too deep and powerful.

I miss you so much! I'm sorry!

Grace was perched on the edge of the pier, on the far side of a rope fence, and appeared just as she had when Flash identified her for the coroner: soaking wet, wearing a shredded Ed Hardy T-shirt, eyes open but vacant. Water dripped from her pale, bloated body—from her chipped, acrylic nails—darkening the wooden planks; otherwise, the image was still.

Flash closed his eyes. He saw silhouettes atop the bank of the channel, heard them scream helplessly as he and Grace blurred by. ... His hand slipped from her wrist. ... A shopping cart flipped on top of her, pushing her under the water.

When he opened his eyes, Grace was gone and the planks were as cracked and parched as his lips.

I hate this drug, he asserted, exhaling and continuing down the sidewalk. Whoever invented it is one sick fuck. Totally twisted. It tears people apart. Brings out their worst fears. Its purpose is to destroy society.

But Grace could smoke it or shoot it up and handle the high, he acknowledged. So can Blaze, Wyatt, and the other guys in the tunnel.

Why am I like this? Why do I see things I don't want to see? Why do I feel things I don't want to feel? Why does it make me hate myself so much?

Guilt, he responded, while crossing a driveway against the signal. A taxi driver sat on the horn, then swerved around him. Guilt about being an absentee father, a drug addict, about being homeless and living in a flood channel, about not saving Grace.

On the far side of the driveway, Flash stopped and stooped to pick at the scabs on his knees. He was still bruised and sore from the flood; it felt like he'd been dragged down the channel by a team of horses. This gave him yet another reason to get high: to numb the physical pain. He was also not prepared to fully and lucidly face the mental anguish of losing Grace the way he did. He'd slammed meth every day since a bulldozer dug her body out of a mountain of debris—he was trying to OD, if possible—and he'd not slept a single second. For the past three days, he'd been huddled in the shadows of the tunnel, without food or water. (Blaze delivered the product to him.) He dreaded what lurked in the light, but thirst and hunger finally drove him from the dark.

Flash stood upright and continued south on the sidewalk. He angled over to a trash can, popped its top, and leaned into the fleeing swarm of flies and bees. He waded through the debris with his free hand, removing a half-eaten, pink-sprinkle doughnut. In two bites, he finished it over the receptacle, then let the lid fall back into place.

Continuing south, he heard a female passerby ask, "Where your kids at, Flash?" Every individual in a long row of Latino handbillers had something negative to offer him—"loser," "tweaker," "thief"—along with the "Dancers Direct to Your Room!" pamphlet. The last handbiller, a young man in a ballcap and backpack, looked him in the eyes and said, "You eat outta trash cans? That's nasty, bro!" Over the PA system of a double-decker bus, the tour guide intoned, "To your immediate right, in the dirty denim shorts, is Flash. He lives in an underground flood channel." The passengers laughed. A few of them raised their cameras, and the flashes popped. "A week ago, he and his girlfriend, Grace, got washed away in a flood. He couldn't save her. He let her drown."

Flash turned toward the bus and dropped to his knees. "Leave me alone!" he screamed. "Haven't I paid enough of a price?"

A pot-bellied man in a bucket hat and collared shirt stood on the top deck of the bus and glared at Flash. "You haven't paid nearly enough!" he spat. "Not for the things you've done!"

As Flash approached the front of the Mirage, there was a roar, a burst of orange light, a surge of heat. He flinched—a fire-breathing dragon had crawled out of hell to punish him for his sins. Tourists jostled for position along the railing and aimed their phones at the volcano, which was shrouded in smoke. Flash was convinced the cameras were front-facing and filming him. He flipped off the crowd and picked up his pace.

He kneeled at the edge of a fountain, at the feet of an armless and headless, winged statue. He chuckled. This must be the angel who's looking over me. One without eyes to guide or hands to heal. He cupped water in his hands and slurped it, then splashed some on his face and hair. He stood and splashed some on his knees, which were bleeding.

Returning to the salmon run of the sidewalk, Flash glanced over his shoulder. An overweight, middle-aged couple in shorts and sports sandals walked closely behind him.

"He's in and out of prison," the man said to the woman.

"And he hasn't seen his daughter in ten years," she added, "and he's never met his grandson."

Flash tugged at the chain fastened to his belt loop, produced a pocket knife, and unclipped it from the ring. He unfolded the knife and spun around.

"Why are you following me?" he screamed at the couple. "Why are you talkin' about me? Get the fuck away!"

The man and woman raised their hands and froze, fear etched on their sunburned faces.

"We're not following you," said the man in a Southern accent.

"What's wrong with you?" the woman asked, rhetorically.

Flash dropped his shoulders and turned away from the couple. He then continued down the Strip, still clutching the knife.

The kaleidoscope of colors at Flamingo Road—hot-pink marquees, cobalt sky, yellow-orange crescent moon—was not brighter and more psychedelic from Flash's perspective.

It was somewhat muted. Nonetheless, it was impressive and alluring, and he couldn't ignore it. He looked up as he walked.

This is God's work. And Grace's, too. I can feel it inside me. In my heart and soul. I feel Him and her all the time. They're always with me.

He flashed back twenty years. Las Vegas was sprawling and he was collecting overtime pay as a construction worker and renting a three-bedroom home in the suburbs. After long, broiling days of pouring and shaping concrete, he'd cool off in the pool. He was married and he and his wife were raising a young daughter. He'd dry off, change into his robe, and play with his daughter on the carpeted living-room floor, while sipping a cold beer and watching sports on TV.

He realized he couldn't have that again—too many things had changed—but he thought he could get sober and have God and Grace by his side. He could get a job and a studio apartment downtown. Reconnect with his daughter, meet his grandson. He wasn't convinced he could do it, but he knew what he couldn't do: keep getting high and living in a tunnel. I can't cope with this anymore. I can't keep being this way—a monster and a lost little boy at the same time.

As he reached Flamingo, the colors began to blur and streak and morph into eerie, familiar images: his step-father towering over his mother, fist raised and balled; his work buddy passing him a meth pipe when they were laid off post-9/11; the roiling floodwater. He was, at once, drawn to the lights and repelled by them.

While the colors were soft, the sounds were sharp and grating. The music and carnival barking from the Cromwell casino, which was on the other side of the Strip, seemed to funnel directly into his ears. Was his head tuned to a dead station? Why did the static roar of the surrounding fountains sound as if it were coming from inside his skull?

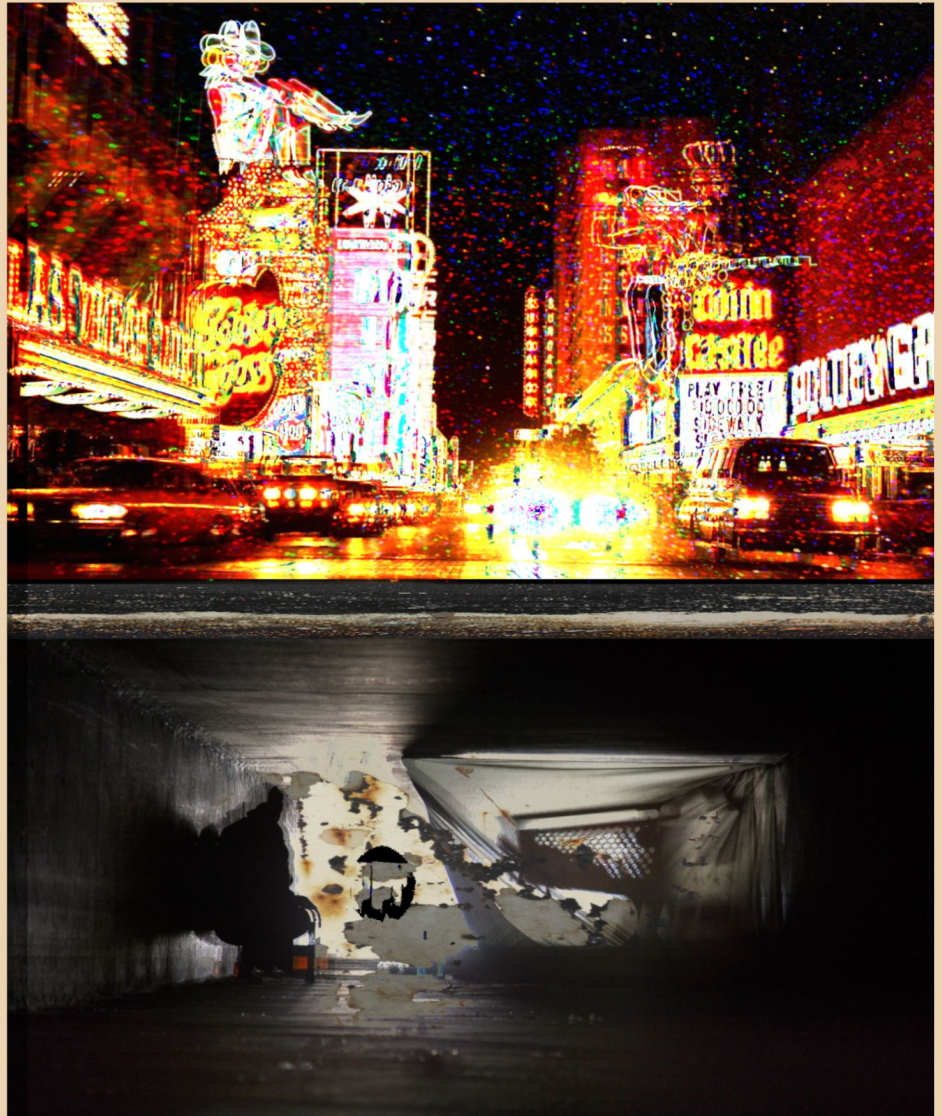
He crouched and placed his hands over his ears, the tip of the knife digging into his shoulder. He stood and closed his eyes. Those planes might as well have crashed into my house, he thought then and many times before. Tears fought through his eyelids and streamed down his face, leaving wide streaks. Passersby ignored him or stared. A few of them pointed at him and laughed.

Flash dabbed his eyes with his shirtsleeve, then turned and made out a Caesars Palace security guard on a Segway. The guard had a walkie-talkie pressed to his lips. Flash folded the knife against the back of his leg, slipped it into his pocket, and started west on Flamingo. The crowd thinned. The sun was no longer visible, but the clouds above the mountains were ablaze.

After crossing a driveway, Flash spun around. The guard had given way to two yellow-shirted Metro Police officers on mountain bikes. They stood on the pedals and leaned over the handlebars. Flash began to run.

At the onramp to I-15, he zigzagged through traffic. Dean Martin Drive appeared and disappeared thirty feet below. As one of the officers closed in on him and ordered him to stop, Flash disappeared behind a concrete wall and angled down a steep embankment that led to the railroad tracks. A train horn bellowed. The engine's headlight flickered in the distance.

The officers dismounted and set their bikes on the sidewalk, but didn't scale the wall. They leaned over it and watched as Flash—a faint silhouette in the dying daylight—scrambled up a gravel hill and approached the tracks. The train, now less than 300 feet away, rocked on the rails. Again, the horn blared. Flash stepped onto the tracks and turned to face the train, positioning his white sneakers on the tar-stained, wooden planks. Head down and chest heaving, he closed his eyes ... and waited.



By Patricio Fidenza

For more of Matthew's work, visit beneaththeneon.com

Inside the mind's of international drag kings and queens

A CONVERSATION WITH RICO TOURKY-BRILLE

Vive la France! Rico Tourky-Brille is one of France's most exciting up and coming drag artists, Bringing theatrical influences, from cabaret to mime, they explore masculinity and camp in a polished and fresh way. Here they answer questions about their inspirations and their reception on French scene as a whole

What got you involved in the drag scene? How did you decide being a King was right for you?

Since I was a kid, I have kind of been exploring being a drag king without noticing it. I always loved to wear a suit but just as a costume since I didn't want my parents or friends to think I was a tomboy (spoiler: I was one and everybody did call me that haha!).

Recently I found some pictures of me at various ages with a thin moustache – always the same despite the years: I was kinda proud going out like this and satisfied when people called me sir in contrast with my day to day life.

Last year, I met some extraordinary people for the short film "King Max" (directed by Adèle Vincenti-Crasson and gives an insight on gender identity and drag kings). These amazing folks encouraged me to do drag (and drag king in particular) and to perform on stage. And I think I will always remember my first gig.

In a way, drag helps me to accept the person I truly am. When I am in king, I instantly feel good about my body and appearance. Rico really gave me the self confidence I thought I had. Today I am not comfortable enough yet to wear suits everyday but I'm working on it!

How do you feel treated as a Drag King? Do you think people have a harder time understanding Drag Kings versus traditional Drag Queens?

I am certainly lucky since I have never been threatened or mocked as a drag king. Sometimes, I even feel like people respect me more when I'm Rico, although I'm far from being scary or impressive. It is true that people always know what a drag queen is but are confused in front of drag kings since there are way less of us represented.

Sometimes, I feel like we are not respected for what we are (misgendered etc); but I believe the more we will see mainstream representations on media the more people will actually know about us and respect this part of drag culture. When I tell people that I'm a Drag King, they always give me a weird look and they don't totally understand what we do. I often have to go on about drag queens first so they can get what it's all about – in a manner of contrast.

Even though we do exist on our own!

Has being from France influenced your drag in any way? Is the reception in France different to the reception in France than in the US/UK/rest of Europe?

I'm surely inspired by French culture, whether it be my look – a tux, my hair sleeked back and a thin black mustache – but also that tacky flirty smooth talker that I often embody on scene. I actually based my whole persona on French (as well Italian) old stereotypes!

I must admit I don't really know how Drag King is received in other countries since I have rarely experienced it elsewhere (but would love to ;) but I guess we are a "bit" late regarding queer community and drags overhere anyway. I am especially used to the Parisian scene which is growing and becoming day by day more impressive, but have heard that other big cities in France are also starting to develop a very interesting community.

What do you think is the most 'camp' thing about France/French culture?

Oh my this is a tough one haha! The essence of French culture is to avoid "too much" at all cost, especially in fashion: do not wear more than 2-3 colors or choose between eyemakeup or lips to name a few. However within Queer culture and Drag, we are on the contrary embracing exantricity, artifice and excess without any limits! I know plenty of Kings with an elegant low-profile style everyday that go full on crazy in their Drag looks. The two-faced beauty of queer French people! I myself mostly wear black on a day to day basis with a few accessories (chains or other dyke stuff) but try to incorporate more colours in my Drag character. I recently did a gay Santa gig I had a lot of fun impersonating and I'm trying to play more and more with colourful makeup..



Photo by Adele Vincenti-Crasson @avincenticrasson

THE CAT'S OUT OF THE DRAG

Interviewed by Bon le Bon

Inside the mind's of international drag kings and queens

Does drag have an influence on how you see gender/gender roles?

Maybe it did a tiny bit when I first discovered drag culture but now, I think drag is not really about gender roles and plays way above this binarity. Of course I sometimes do consciously use gender clichés on scene but I never create my performances thinking like "Ok how would a cis man behave and walk " or anything. The fact that I was already aware of quite a few of these topics and fighting how gender roles impact society when I started performing probably plays a good part in how I try not to perpetuate them but denounce them through satire and caricature of (toxic) masculinity.

Drag can be another form of activism for many and allows us to be freed from gender roles, as shown by the artists labelling themselves "Drag-Queen" or "Drag-Fuck" to escape the opposition between Queens and Kings.

What is the most important part of drag for you? The makeup, the costumes, or the performance?

The part I like most in drag is without any doubt the performance part. Beside drag I'm an actor and the scene has always been a place I love to be on. During shows, I like to interact directly with the public and I share so much with them, every gig is a completely unique experience that fills me with joy. It's always such a good and kind atmosphere where you are not judged for who you are and everyone hypes up one another, it truly is a safe place which I don't always experience in my other job. You also find a certain freedom when you create performances by yourself, with a theme or not. It enables you to be the most creative version of yourself. That's why I prefer performances rather than the makeup or dressing part because I'm not that good putting up together intricate looks in makeup or costumes... but I'm learning slowly !

For me the very purpose of that (still very cool) getting ready part exists to nourish the actual visible part which is the performance. I do enjoy that special secret moment spent with fellow artists before the show but the scene is still what excites me the most ! I always secretly loved making people laugh and seeing my friends forget their lil everyday life troubles for a few minutes (well I should consider becoming a clown for kids birthdays).



Photo by Clothilde LECLERCQ

**FOR MORE RICO, FOLLOW HIS INSTAGRAM
@RICO_TOURKY_BRILLE**



**FOR MORE ON "KING MAX" THE FILM CHECK IT OUT
ON ARTE.TV/FR**



How the French presidential elections have highlighted the country's conservatism on transgender rights

By Cara Doumbe Kingue

As I am writing these lines, France will assist in exactly two hours to the final debate between the last two candidates running for presidency: outgoing president Emmanuel Macron and far-right representative Marine le Pen.

Regardless of who is going to become the president for the next five years after this confrontation, one thing is certain: their interest in transgender rights is inexistent.

It is undeniable that this year's presidential campaign was heavily darkened by the hyperconservative ideology as two of the 12 candidates, namely the previously mentioned Le Pen and Eric Zemmour who were both strong in the polls, represented extreme-right parties.

The latter, who was condemned for racial hate speech in the past, focused his campaign on the idea that France is declining and losing its core values. His numerous comments on so-called "LGBT indoctrination" in schools fully normalized the oh-so classical conservative paranoia towards queer individuals' rhetoric. His extremism forced his rivals to perpetually contradict him instead of being able to develop their ideas for more LGBTQI+ inclusion.

Without any repercussion or any questioning, the ex-TV pundit went as far as affirming that he finds unacceptable that "10-year-old children are being asked if they feel [like a boy or girl and encouraged to use puberty blockers]" in schools. One of the multiple pieces of fake information he spread to serve his transphobic political faction before the first round of the elections.

Le Pen, almost in the same political vein as him, unsurprisingly followed his example by insisting on the fact that "no sexuality should be promoted to minors" not even bothering to dive more into the multiplicity of LGBTQI+ issues and existences.

Unfortunately, her opponent for the highest office, centrist President Macron, wasn't any better as he also expressed during the campaign that "it has yet to be defined if the Republican school should orientate [pupils before highschool]" by mentioning orientation and gender questions. Observers weren't surprised by his comments however as he hasn't prioritized queer rights during his mandate.

These timorous, to not say conservative, views have been ruling for decades. France's handling of queer rights beyond the sole same-sex marriage question. It can notably be observed through the fact that LGBTQI+ related topics are being left out of the mandatory sex ed courses and that French schools were shown to be particularly late when it comes to the protection and accompanying of gender minorities.

The global situation of transgender people in the country is quite alarming. 80% of the community reported having been attacked and/or discriminated because of their identity and in parallel the overall violence against LGBTQI+ individuals has been notably increasing.

Among numerous discriminations, the medical care is still particularly violent towards transgender people, both mentally (mis-gendering, systematic psychiatrization...) and physically (botched surgeries and lack of listening), because of the accumulated lateness regarding staff training and also as a consequence of the lack of consideration of the existence of transgender people in French society.

This marginalization is not without consequence as 20% of French transgender people surveyed attempted suicide and 60% of them suffered from depression. Unfortunately, the data is scarce and the overview of this topic stays limited. It can be explained by the reality that despite the apparently progressive legislation, there was never a real change in mentality and consequently the mistreatment of transgender persons and its effects are both underreported and ignored.

French activists tried to center debates of these elections around the question of LGBTQI+ rights with a specific attention given to transphobia to stop the spread of fake discourses created by the conservatives and to instead focus on much needed solutions. However, the wrong has already been done and France will seriously need to question itself going forward.

President Macron is currently estimated to be most likely to win the elections, surely the best option for a minimal conservation of LGBTQI+ rights compared to a far-right presidency. But one can only wonder if a potential second mandate from him would really be beneficial to transgender people.

In France, the fight for more social justice and equity for the particularly fragile transgender community is late and often an after thought. It is time to ring the alarm and for "progressive" politicians to boldly contribute to this necessary fight.



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OFF THE RECORD

Women rocking the world

By Bon le Bon

Scene Queen

TikTok viral sensation, queer icon and punk rockstress, based on her previous releases and her upcoming "**Pink Panther**" single, **Scene Queen** is not going to slow down any time soon. Fun, upbeat and reminiscent of both early 2000s Avril Lavigne and late 80s hair metal bands, with a sense of humour not far from Steel Panther. While some have critiqued her lyrics for being misogynistic and hyper-sexual, it's hard to find much power in that argument; this is a woman who loves women shouting it to the rooftops without any concern, something that is so rarely permitted in any culture or media. Hopefully **Scene Queen** brings about more change in the music scene and encourages other female queer performers to be loud and proud.

Stand out songs: Pink Rover and Pretty In Pink.

KILO KISH

A totally unique sound mixing hip-hop, hyperpop, a warped version of 80s synthpop plus a beautiful and distinctive voice, **KILO KISH** is only gaining traction. All her releases in the last few years have been phenomenal, and are only continuing to become more focused and polished. Echoing **Porches**, **Arca**, **SOPHIE**, **Visage**, and earlier 2000s synthwave producers such as **College** and **Tesla Boy** in many of her songs, she manages to create something entirely new and distinctive from these familiar influences. Additionally, while many of her songs create a dreamy atmosphere in their sound and lyrics, when you dive deeper they make incisive commentary on society and politics which show a real intelligence which is wonderful to find.

Stand out songs: AMERICAN GURL and BLOODY FUTURE.



By Jakayla Toney

Left At London

Originally known for their Vines, which were hilarious, the artist known now as Nat Puff is talented in many other arenas too. Funny, imaginative, compassionate, and totally unique, her music is beautifully written and produced-- mostly by herself. Her lyrics deal with extremely personal, yet relatable, issues of trauma and addiction, gender issues, and mental health problems. By showing her vulnerability, **Left At London** creates not only good music but a safe space and a community for so many people and may her artistry continue to transform the world.

Stand out songs: It Could be Better and there is a place for you here.

Problem Patterns

Born out of the original punk centre of the world, Belfast, these girls are taking the entire rock music scene by storm. With pure aggression, these ladies vent their just frustrations at the world and demand change through politically charged lyrics, shredding guitars, and a tight drum beat. Not just campaigning for women, they campaign for all women-- as their members are queer, their song **Gal Pals** pays tribute to WLW relationships, and their iconic anthem **Terfs Out** is a beautifully stated manifesto. Still to release a full album, it is clear that whatever is cooking is definitely going to be worth the wait!

Stand out songs: Y.A.W and Mediocre Man.

Nova Twins

These two are truly pioneers. Melting rock, pop punk, metal and new machine pop sounds, plus genuinely being fun, the **Nova Twins** are on the rise with nearly a million monthly listeners on Spotify and features on tour with **Yungblud**. Lyrics about female empowerment and rights, filled with pop culture and historical references, and between the lines are heavily political. Reminiscent of modern day **Muse** only much more fresh, they are definitely worth watching-- literally, as their outfits are stunning.

Stand out songs: Cleopatra and Taxi.

Kanye's obsessive and abusive attitude towards Kim Kardashian needs to be called out

By Christine Kinori

On February 19, 2021, Kim Kardashian officially filed for a divorce and since then the world has had a front-row seat to one of the highly publicized divorces in Hollywood. Their divorce came as no surprise to the millions of fans who had slowly watched as tensions frayed over the years. Kanye's newly found religious stance and his controversial statements about slavery, aborting North, and their private family life, were just some of the few things that drove a wedge between the power couple. The final straw was perhaps when he bought a ranch in Wyoming and based himself there.

Despite their split, Kim and Kanye seemed to be getting along fairly well. Kim showed up to support Kanye live events promoting his 2021 album, Donda. It was during this time that Kanye started making public pleas to win Kim back. At first, it seemed like a sweet gesture but as things continued to unfold within their divorce, it was clear that Kanye was having a hard time coming to terms with the end of their marriage. It became even more concerning when his proclamations of love quickly turned into allegations and airing their dirty laundry on social media.

The allegations and parenting battles started immediately after the rumors about Kim dating SNL presenter and actor Pete Davidson hit the headlines. Kanye, who still had hope that they might get back together, continued to profess his love for Kim in numerous interviews and even sang "Run Right Back to Me Kimberly" during a concert with Drake. However, Kim through court documents made it clear that she had no desire to reconcile her relationship. As it became clear that Kim had no intention of getting back together, Kanye decided to take a different approach and attack both Kim and her new boyfriend in a series of interviews and erratic social media posts.

In his interview with his Hollywood Unlocked, Kanye alluded to the existence of an unreleased second sex tape featuring his Kim and Ray J. In the interview, he addressed the new relationship between Pete and Kim "How you gonna bring me to SNL and kiss the dude you're dating right in front of me?" he said. "And everybody's like, 'Oh, that's, that's cool.' After I went [and] got the laptop from Ray J myself that night, right?" According to Kanye, he personally went to the airport to get the video from Ray J and delivered it to Kim who cried upon seeing the footage. Kim promptly issued a statement denying the existence of the second tape.

Kanye threw a low curveball again when he took to social media to accuse Kim of bad parenting. The drama started after Kim allowed their first daughter North to appear on TikTok without Kanye's consent. This is not the first time he has publicly attacked Kim regarding matters involving their kids. He accused her of trying to "kidnap my daughter on her birthday" when she allegedly did not provide him with the address to their daughter Chicago's fourth birthday party.

Kim addressed the issue through her Instagram stories and explained how the false narrative that Kanye is being denied access to his kids and Kanye's obsession with trying to control and manipulate our situation so negatively and publicly is only causing further pain for all. She implored him to keep their family matters private and to use the right channels for them to resolve any issues amicably.

The lowest blow came just a few weeks later when Kanye released a music video depicting a Davidson lookalike being kidnapped and buried in the ground. This raised concern given that it was not the first time the rapper has made clear and concise threats against Kim's new boyfriend. In one song, he raps that he will certainly put Davidson's "security at risk." In another, he sings about pulling up to SNL with a hundred goons. In another verse, he claims, "God saved me from that crash just so I can beat Pete Davidson's ass." He asked fans to chant "KimYe forever!" when they see Davidson, whom he has dubbed "Skete," in one of his many rants on social media.

He went on to ignore Kim's plea to stop his social media attacks on her and Pete, instead, he publicly shared screenshots of their private messages. In the message, Kim had expressed her fear, pleading with him to stop "U are creating a dangerous and scary environment and someone will hurt Pete and this will all be your fault," she texted. However, her plea fell on deaf ears. Kanye posted along with the screenshot of their messages, "UPON MY WIFE'S REQUEST PLEASE NOBODY DO ANYTHING PHYSICAL TO SKETE IM GOING TO HANDLE THE SITUATION MYSELF." He also included a picture of one man choking another.

It is concerning that this has been playing out in the media as fodder for entertainment. In reality, the core issue here is being ignored. Kim is being vehemently attacked by her ex and she seemingly can't do anything to get him to stop. The reality is this happens to so many women and there is little being done to ensure their safety. It only blows up when it is too late to save them from their obsessive exes. Kanye continues to escalate his attacks on Kim and Pete and it is not funny but rather terrifying that he can get away with it.

The intimidation and opening her up for public ridicule is borderline dangerous. Kanye practically put a hit list on both of them. He can go out and date every Kim Kardashian look-alike but he draws the line at Kim wanting to move on with her life as well. That is just toxic and manipulative but the world will stand and watch because she is a woman they love to hate. They will watch as she continues to be a victim of a public stalking and harassment campaign, constantly being tormented by her ex simply for leaving him. Kanye will use religion saying God doesn't want his family to break apart and vilify her for choosing to leave and send this message to his legion of fans.

The message here is clear, never take no for an answer instead start stalking your ex online and threaten her and any man who comes close to her. Go a step further and create a fake narrative and pursue it to the end. It is your so-called freedom of speech to ridicule your ex and make her life a nightmare. As someone who has faced dating abuse, it sickens me how helpless women are in these situations. Let's be honest if this was happening to your sister, daughter, or mother, you would have seen it for the crime it is. The severity of the matter would not be lost on you.

This is why so many women in toxic relationships struggle to leave, it is the fear of how their ex will react and how society will treat them. They are not perceived as victims but rather as villains. They pay a high price for ending a relationship and in some cases, they never make it out alive. The dynamic between Kanye and Kim is disturbing and highly abusive. Whether you hate Kim or not, she is a victim and this is really what happens to women when they leave their misogynistic, controlling partners.

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Regaining my self-worth after self-harm

by Jennifer Sizeland

It felt easy to hate myself as a teenager. The fight against my own inner negativity followed me through days and nights. My mistakes seemed almost constant and rattled around in my anxious mind, popping up in even the most joyful of moments. My focus was on all the things I did wrong, mistakes that I thought everyone I knew would remember forever. Of course, it wasn't true and the spotlight you put yourself under as a teen doesn't translate to the real world where so much is going on.

I started self-harming when I was 15. My mistakes felt too big and the pain too deep. I punished myself so much with my mind that it eventually became physical.

What I didn't know was that many friends were feeling their own version of this. That the adage that everybody makes mistakes is ostensibly true. A teenager's inexperience in life inevitably means messing up, but I reacted to it as if the decisions of my youth would define me my entire adult life, which of course they didn't.

I lived in a small town in rural England, not quite affluent enough to be classed as middle England, but overwhelmingly conservative in its nature nonetheless. Sometimes it felt like being under a microscope, especially as many people really did know my name and my family. It meant that even going for a crafty smoke was difficult without running into someone who would tell on you to your mum.

The trials of this age felt overwhelming to me - friendship fallouts, family arguments, the pressure to do well at school, to be attractive to boys and the fear of missing out on social events. I warped situations into their exact opposite, once harming myself because I thought a boy didn't like me when actually, he did.

We dated for a few months until he cheated on me. I was devastated, but it forced me to realise that he wasn't the be-all and end-all. That I couldn't pin my self-esteem on a single person and self-love had to come from within. I started to feel the same way about my friends as there were plenty of others out there that I would meet later on. That I would meet people who were more relaxed, kinder and less judgemental.

Through the difficult times there was always something that I focussed on to get me through, whether it was reading a good book, looking for wildlife, seeing friends or visiting my beloved nanna. After that, time and freedom helped me to view things differently. I started to get excited for the future and the decisions I could make for myself. The beginnings of independence helped me to gain perspective. I got a job in a shop which meant I could go on holiday with my friends as well as a small backpacking trip in Europe with the money I'd saved. My results came in from my exams and it was enough that I could go to university in Manchester and start to find my way.

Even though I had some good times back at home, moving away was the best decision I ever made for myself at 18. I stopped self-harming, got another job doing Army training, started university and slowly began the process of making my life about me and not about everyone else in it. For 18 years I'd had my life ruled by parents, school, college, friends and boyfriends, now I needed to take the helm.

Self-harming was fuelled by my powerlessness so I worked slowly to gain some sort of control in all of it. It's true that nobody is fully in control of their own life, but I started to journey towards my own happiness, by finding new friendships, relationships, interests and growing a career.

Even though I left self-harm in my teenage years, there were still plenty of bumps in the road, for a decade I wrestled with anxiety, depression and OCD. With medication, counselling and CBT I finally realised I was punishing myself unnecessarily. I was just a person and my life, mistakes and problems were like anyone else's, but my reactions were causing me more pain.

When I looked around, things were better and I almost hadn't realised. I had an interesting job, a supportive partner and some lovely friends. While I still make mistakes, I am much kinder to myself. Healing has been a slow process that has taken nearly 20 years, but it has been worth every minute of the joy that it's created. Fast forward to now and I am in a place where I have had a child myself, something I'd never thought possible. It continues today as I try to extend the compassion to my son that I never received, I parent myself as I parent him.

Despite all the work I've done, my self-worth isn't unshakeable, I just no longer punish myself physically or mentally. I imagine myself as my own child and I promise myself that I have no reason to bring hurt on myself. Every day I try to unburden the pain others have caused, one piece at a time.

Alternatives that will give you a sensation

- Hold ice in your hands, against your arm, or in your mouth
- Run your hands under freezing cold water
- Snap a rubber band or hair band against your wrist
- Clean your hands until it stings
- Wax your legs
- Drink freezing cold water
- Splash your face with cold water
- Put PVA/Elmer's glue on your hands then peel it off
- Massage where you want to hurt yourself
- Take a hot shower/bath
- Jump up and down to get some sensation in your feet
- Write or paint on yourself
- Arm wrestle with a member of your family
- Take a cold bath
- Bite into a hot pepper or chew a piece of ginger root
- Rub liniment under your nose
- Put tiger balm on the places you want to cut. (Tiger balm is a muscle relaxant cream that induces a tingly sensation. You can find it in most health food stores and vitamin stores.)


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





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 TALK don't demand a long talk, invite listen, care	 CHECK YOURSELF care for yourself, Get support but respect privacy
 DON'T PUNISH mental illness symptoms are not discipline	 PAY ATTENTION it is not likely after: from stopping, but does increase suicide risk
 GET THERAPY get referral, try a few, consider family therapy	 HARM REDUCTION recovery can be slow, support harm reduction, not just stopping

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Dr Reddy's Mental Health Helpline	0800 21 22 23
Pharma Dynamics Trauma Helpline	0800 20 50 24
Adcock Ingram Depression and Anxiety Helpline	0800 70 80 70
ADHD Helpline	0800 55 44 33
Destiny Helpline	0800 41 42 43
HDI "You Decide" Youth Helpline	0800 33 33 77
24 Hour Substance Abuse Helpline	0800 12 13 14

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Why the Dutch Law Against Sexual Violence Is Flawed

By Nina Kollof

For my final paper of my university's minor in Gender and Sexuality, I decided to critically analyse the current Dutch law against sexual violence. What I found was worse than I already expected. While I write this article from the Dutch perspective and the claims I make are based on studies from the Netherlands, it is very likely that they also apply to wherever in the world you are from. Before you continue reading, I would like to give a content warning. I will be mentioning sexual violence and rape and give formal definitions. Please consider your own mental health, if reading about these topics upsets you, it might be better to skip this article.

If you live in the Netherlands, it is likely that you know at least one woman who has experienced sexual violence. As many as one in every five women between 18 and 24 years old has been a victim of sexual violence in only one year's time. If we look at the whole Dutch population, as many as 7,5% consider themselves to be a victim of rape while 11% have experienced what we would qualify as rape. Despite so many people experiencing sexual violence, only very few actually report this to the police. These numbers were very shocking to me, as a survivor myself, I found it deeply upsetting to realize how many people experienced the same thing as me. But why would only so few feel like they could go to the police? Well, being one of them myself, I already know the answer: The law is flawed and blames the victims in most cases. But of course I couldn't just write about my own experience in an academic paper, so I decided to carefully read the law and find its implications for victims.

In the current law against sexual violence there are two important definitions made. Sexual assault is defined as forcing someone to commit or tolerate sexual actions by use of violence or under threat of violence. Someone who is found guilty of sexual assault can be sentenced to a maximum of eight years' imprisonment and can be fined. This sentence is lowered to a maximum of six years and with a lower fine if the victim was unconscious, less conscious or bodily unable to resist due to intoxication or a handicap⁴. Rape is defined as forcing someone to have their body penetrated by use of violence or under threat of violence. Someone who is found guilty of rape can be sentenced to a maximum of twelve years' imprisonment and can be fined. This sentence is lowered to a maximum of eight years and with a lower fine if the victim was unconscious, less conscious or bodily unable to resist due to intoxication or a handicap.

There is a lot to unpack here, so let's start. First of all, these definitions imply that a person has only been raped or assaulted if there was use or threat of violence. This invalidates experiences of people who have been emotionally manipulated into sexual acts. This definition also does not account for the possibility of the victim to freeze in fear in reaction to their assault, while research has already shown that this is a real reaction that people can have. As many as 22% of victims of sexual violence will likely have this freeze response. Not only this, but by making the sentences less severe when the victim was unable to resist because of intoxication or a handicap, it is implied that their experience is less important, less painful, less scarring than that of sober, able-bodied victims. Are you angry yet?

My blood is certainly boiling, and we're not even finished yet, so bear with me. While we've already seen how these definitions invalidate certain experiences, it also makes the "valid" ones very hard to prove. Since these definitions dictate the proof needed to take legal actions, this means that victims need to show proof of violence such as bruises, cuts and samples of sperm from the perpetrator⁶. These physical pieces of evidence are temporary. Bruises disappear, cuts heal and sperm will wash away. You know where I'm going with this, this means that a victim has a very short timeframe to go to the police and make their report. To have the best chance at justice, you need to have been able to fight your perpetrator so hard that it left bruises or even cuts on your body, the perpetrator should have a penis and not have used a condom. Then, as soon as he finished, you should instantly realise that you have been raped, not go into shock and run to the police so the evidence is still fresh. While all the perpetrator has to do is make sure to not leave any physical evidence so you have zero proof. Not only can many victims who do realise what happened to them not get any justice, but this law is also invalidating to victims who are still coming to terms with their experience. If they don't have bruises, does that mean they weren't raped? If they were too scared to fight their perpetrator, does that mean they weren't raped? Who does this law really protect? The victims? I don't think so.

I do want to give a little hope. In 2020 the Dutch Minister of Justice and Security, Minister Grapperhaus, wrote a bill for a new law against sexual violence. With this new law, violence is no longer necessary to prove sexual violence and any type of sexual act performed or tolerated without consent will be punishable by law. Even sending of sexual texts or images without consent will be made punishable and more articles are written for victims who weren't fully conscious and the sentences are all made more severe. While the new law isn't perfect, it will be a huge improvement and will allow many more victims to get the justice they deserve.

Oh, how I wish I could end my article there, but no. Even though the bill is completely finished and has been approved for implementation, it has been postponed to 2024 and Minister Grapperhaus has resigned as of January 10, 2022. With the current law in place, there are 100.000 victims of sexual violence or rape in the Netherlands every year⁸, and only very few make an official report. Based on these numbers, there will be around 200.000 more victims between now and 2024. Victims are treated as numbers and numbers can wait. But we're real people, with real lives that can be completely turned upside down by acts of sexual violence. We can't wait.

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<p>Talk on the phone</p> <p>Call 0808 802 9999</p> <p>The National Helpline is provided by <u>Rape Crisis South London</u>. It offers confidential emotional support, information and referral details.</p> <p>Open between 12pm-2.30pm and 7pm-9.30pm every day of the year.</p> <p>England</p>	<p>Poland (also providing Ukrainian support)</p> <p>COLLECTIF FEMINISTE CONTRE LE VIOL</p> <p>VIOLS FEMMES INFORMATIONS</p> <p>N° national 0 800 05 95 95</p> <p>APPEL GRATUIT / ANONYME / LUN-VEN 10H-19H</p> <p>France</p>	<p>24 Hour Helpline</p> <p>1800 778888</p> <p>The 24 hour helpline is run by the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre.</p> <p>Ireland</p>	<p>CSG</p> <p>Bel 0800-0188</p> <p>Gratis (en anoniem)</p> <p>Netherlands</p> <p>021.447 9762</p> <p>AHHA ЦЕНТР</p> <p>Russia</p>
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How has my view of abortion changed since falling pregnant for the first time?

by Katie Alexander

The decision to terminate a pregnancy wasn't something that I had overly considered until I was actually taught about sex education and abortion at secondary school. From that moment on, I couldn't understand why anti-abortion protesters and local governments would block access to vital healthcare.

I was automatically on-board with the pro-choice movement and didn't think anything more of it. It wasn't until I was 17 that abortion impacted my own family. My parents had chosen to terminate their much wanted pregnancy at 17 weeks gestation after having a fatal foetal anomaly diagnosis. I very quickly realised at that point that abortion is much, much more than so-called unloving people terminating unwanted pregnancies.

Since then, I've spent a lot of my adult life researching, communicating and advocating for better abortion legislation in the UK and across the globe. Whether it be volunteering at baby loss charities or campaigning alongside abortion activists and providers, abortion has always been a huge part of my identity. I just truly feel we cannot, and should not, deny healthcare to those in need.

Plus, we all know the dangers that come with criminalising abortion access. In areas where abortion services are not legally available, pregnant people suffer. Their health and their lives suffer. No one should be forced to choose between continuing with an unwanted pregnancy and protecting their own health, security and safety.

"You're not a parent - your opinion doesn't count!"

Since showing my support for the pro-choice movement, I've heard it all. I've been told time and time again how awful or misleading it is that I support both those who choose to terminate and those who suffer a baby loss.

Likewise, how different I'll feel about abortion when I fall pregnant and have a child of my own. I do not know what it is like to be pregnant, birth a child or raise one. How could I possibly support abortion as a mother?!

While I never believed these comments, because they're ridiculous, it is funny to apply that logic to anything else. Imagine arguing someone couldn't possibly support gay rights purely because they are not a member of the LGBTQ+ community themselves. It doesn't really work.

My opinion of abortion has changed since being pregnant

In November 2021, my long-term boyfriend and I decided we were ready to stop preventing pregnancy. To our own surprise, we fell pregnant within the first month. I'm currently 23 weeks pregnant at the time of writing this, so do I feel any differently about abortion?

To be blunt, yes, I do feel differently about abortion now than I ever had before. I'm more pro-choice and pro-abortion.

When my partner and I found out we were expecting, we were ecstatic. I will remember the overwhelming joy of reading pregnant on the test. My heart was quickly full of love, but, of course, I was somewhat nervous for the future.

Making the decision to have a child is a massive step and even though I feel ready in a lot of ways, there's a lot I'm worried about. No one really tells you what to expect during pregnancy alone. Of course, you hear about the morning sickness, sleepless nights and the labour, but there's a lot I wasn't prepared for. I do not have a baby yet, but I have had to deal with being pregnant for the last five months. I was struggling at five weeks gestation. Growing a child is hard work.

One of the biggest cop-out comments you hear about pregnant people seeking abortions is "why don't you consider adoption?" I'm not sure if anti-abortion protesters are aware that you still have to grow, carry and give birth to a full-sized baby in nine months time?!

The most difficult part of being pregnant is not always preparing for a baby, sometimes it is being pregnant. We need to stop idolising pregnancy as this wonderful, joyous time that has no worries or negative emotions. It isn't always like that.

Battling my mental health during pregnancy

I've, thankfully, felt relatively good physically throughout my pregnancy so far but my mental health has certainly taken a hit. There's a lot of worries during pregnancy, even for someone who's classified as low risk like me.

Since being pregnant, I've found myself in some of the worst mental states I've ever experienced. Of course, some of that will be impacted by pregnancy hormones, but ultimately being pregnant is just a lot to deal with. I've found myself feeling anxious over massive decisions and questioning literally everything about myself. What if I'm not ready to raise a whole human or if I do something wrong? Can I actually be a parent? Where do I even start? These are just some of the thoughts that have been tormenting my brain over the past 23 weeks. I can't even begin to imagine the mental battles of being pregnant with a baby you know you're not ready to or cannot have.

I'm praying for a healthy and happy little human and I'm still struggling. I have the support of a partner who loves me and I still feel like I can't cope. How do we expect pregnant people to put their lives and mental health on hold for a foetus they do not want?!

How could you let anyone live nine months of their life with this ongoing torment? Especially when, in the UK at least, we live in a society where abortion is legally available. Pregnant people who choose to have abortions are not evil. They are not unloving. Most importantly, they are not doing anything wrong. They are choosing what is right for them at that moment.

I am pro-choice, pregnant and proud

I still support charities and organisations fighting globally to better abortion access for everyone, because that is everyone's right. Regardless of the decision I made.

I support the decisions other people make when they find out their pregnancies, because I hope others will respect and support mine. I hope there is suitable support available for those who need it, because I hope there will be if I ever do, or my children do.

The truth is abortion is a necessary part of life as are many other reproductive healthcare procedures. Every healthcare patient has the choice of whether to accept their treatment, or whether to let life play out. Why is it any different for people wanting to decide whether to continue with a pregnancy? Governments, professionals, friends and family are not in control of pregnant people's lives. It is time we let them decide their fate, without the stigma and judgement of our own beliefs.

Being pro-choice is not necessarily being pro-abortion. Being pro-choice is allowing people to make their own decisions, regardless of what decision you might make.

So, yes. You can support abortion and be pregnant or have pre-existing children. Pregnancy is challenging at the best of times. It certainly isn't something I would wish on anyone who did not want it (and I haven't even given birth yet!)

the war on women

by Bonnie Shawcross

Women rule the world. We can see them everywhere; with increasing visibility in politics, in untraditional professions, in innovation, and of course in the media as millionaire songstress, actresses and influencers. Hundreds of articles encourage women to find themselves and go for the stars— the sky is the limit and every woman is a superhero waiting for her chance to shine.

Those changes are great. Some female politicians might be callous and cruel, some female tech entrepreneurs can equally create a dystopian technocratic future, and plenty of divas on stage are demonic off. But they all have a right to be there and be equally capable of fucking up and being evil as any man.

So the world is good and dandy, we are all making progress, and women are all having a great time. If only.

There are myriads of women suffering every second around the world. Mothers watch their children be ripped from them, taken into the slave trade. Daughters tremble as a familiar creak outside their door announces the beginning of nightly abuse. Civilians walk down war-torn streets, praying they get hit by a bullet rather than seized to be used as holes for rapacious soldiers. Wives beaten to a pulp for existing and antagonising their husbands. Grandmothers left to be neglected as their fading beauty and strength renders them worthless in the eyes of their societies. Many many more, in all roles and all places in society, suffering based on their gender and their gender alone.

Why do we hate women? Perceived as weak, perhaps it is all due to a base primal instinct to exert power. We like having power; if you are a big strong man, the temptation to exploit those smaller and less able to defend themselves must be so overwhelming. There is much to say about the cycle of abuse; men are often abuse victims, imprisoned by a society that associates victimhood with failure, with weakness, and with unmanliness, and the abused can seek the power they lost through oppressing others. Not always, but sometimes. That is the extent to which my sympathy goes.

Jack Holland's excellent book **A Brief History of Misogyny** attempts to delve into the origin of the world's oldest prejudice. It is ironic, in a way, that it takes a book written by a man to potentially give the discussion some credibility with other men. Of course, some men will refuse to acknowledge a problem; a man on the side of women is 'brainwashed' or equally 'weaker', 'pandering' to try and 'get some'.

I think the depressing reality is many people believe in natural hierarchies, which have constantly been proven far more complex than the inaccurate 'survival of the fittest'. White people genuinely still believe black people are dirtier, dumber, or less worthy of the best in society. Straight people still perceive gay people are perverse, more likely to be pedophiles, less trustworthy and downright repulsive. So it follows that men sincerely do not see women as equal, and never will, and do not see hurting or manipulating them as any worse than abusing or slaughtering a farm animal.

Ashling Murphy was going for a run during the day near Tullamore, County Offaly in Ireland. She was murdered. For being a woman. Would the murderer have targeted anyone of any gender? Possibly. But why did he target her of everyone? An article in *The Guardian* stated that there were 81 women murdered in the weeks following the murder of Sarah Everard (which provoked outcry and vigils across the country, an especially painful murder as it was committed by a policeman). 81 lives gone for no reason.

According to *SheThePeople*, up to 7000 women are murdered a year in India, often due to arranged marriage disputes. Talented athlete Damaris Muthee Mutua was murdered yesterday (19th April) in Kenya, allegedly by her boyfriend. In Italy, over a thousand women are killed every year; an average of one every three days. New Year's Day 2021 saw the murders of 3 women across France, most likely all victims of domestic violence. According to the FBI, at least four black women and girls were murdered per day across America in 2020.

Misogynistic violence does not always end in death. But it can impact women for decades, leading to a half-lived life. In Kenya, statistics suggest at least 40% of women have faced sexual and physical abuse at the hands of a partner. Nearly 23 thousand Russian women in 2020 were victims of family crimes according to Statista. In 2018 over 127 thousand rapes with the victims being women were reported in the United States. Another study from the same year estimates that over 80% of Indigenous American women have experienced violence, and over half specifically sexual violence. Across 16 days, over 130 rapes were reported in Botswana— although the exact demographics of the victims are not known. I could keep listing countries and statistics, but you can see the picture forming.

These are the most heinous crimes against women. But the hatred does not always have to show itself like this. It undoubtedly will, some day, but it begins in smaller forms. A casual search on Twitter reveals at least 8 tweets from men in the last 2 hours directly stating they hate women. Revealing my voice in a Call of Duty lobby for two seconds led to men on three different occasions saying 'I hate women', 'shut up stupid bitch', and 'this is why women shouldn't be on here'. In one of the YouTube videos talking about the main **Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War** character can be of either gender or non-binary, many of the comments trash this feature and state how unrealistic it is, despite the fact that there are other established female characters in-universe, and if they think there have never been non-binary or trans women in the military then they are quite ignorant.

The discussion about trans women is for another article, but including them in women's violence would add thousands more to all the prior statistics. According to *PinkNews*, "between 1 October 2020 and 30 September 2021, at least 375 trans, non-binary or gender non-conforming people were slain across the world." 96% of them were trans women or trans femme people. 125 of these murders took place in Brazil, but America is close behind, with 50 trans women killed between January and October 2021.

What lurks underground across the world, and online, we may never know. Locked forums where men discuss their hatred for women and proud posts about their abuse of them exist. Secret group chats where non-consenting sexual content such as nudes, rape videos, and personal details of women, are passed around like trading cards. Party yachts of the rich where trafficked girls are brought out to be used, dark clubs where girls are sold as a taboo luxury, and in bright open spaces where imported brides are shown off like dolls unable to communicate the trap they have fallen into.

Perhaps worst are the casual conversations between friends and family where there is no incriminating track record. Where ideas about women and justification for their oppression go unchecked. As men learn that misogyny is part of manhood, that women are objects and the right to use and discard them is a man's privilege, and that anyone who takes a woman's side is weak. Or that they, might men, have to protect the fragile woman as they are not as competent in mind or body.

And to the women overhearing or involved in those conversations, there is an equally poor fate. They become indoctrinated to live in fear, to behave differently, to join in the party and start to hate women themselves. They will tear down those who don't conform, or those who conform too much, and fight each other for the male approval they hope will give them protection from male abuse.

If you are a woman reading this who has never felt affected by these issues, then be glad. But please believe the millions who tell their stories every day. Help them, if you can. Encourage the good men to challenge other men. Challenge them yourself. Protect yourselves and each other. We can't all fix everything at once but we can at least try to start somewhere.

And spare a thought for the dozens of women around the world who have lost their lives in the time it has taken to read this article.

One day it must change and every choice we make today will pave the way for that to happen.



"linger longer" by Gamze Seckin



"fairy world" by Helena

The New Era of Boy-Meets-Girl Storylines in Books

By Velvet Opus

The fiction of love plagued me through puberty, and bled into my adult life. The narrative of my dreams was societally constructed: me, a helpless girl, him, a boy waiting to save me. I acted my role impeccably. I was placating, docile, outwardly weak. But for these boys, there was no acting. They required submission like worship, and I willfully complied. I called myself a hopeless romantic, but the reality was that I was simply hopeless, molded into a shape that let boys dress up in stolen power, and shrank me into a husk, wilting like a flower in a bouquet: fingerprint shaped bruises across the cut stems.

That was my real life, but it was also the fictional life of the girls in the boy-meets-girls romance novels I read from the 90's and early 2000's. Having been force fed this narrative in my real life, I unwillingly continued to eat it up in fictional stories. The stories and my life wound around each other and became a series of chasing echoes in a never ending chasm.

Until one day, when something shifted. Imperceptibly at first, a bud of a blossom began to unfurl inside me, growing, hardening, prickling at my edges. Book by book, the 'Prince Charming' type began to wear me down and physically repel me – I no longer dreamt of kisses under a starlit sky, I dreamt of respect. Equally matched witty banter became my drink of choice, and consent turned me on. I joined a chorus of voices, readers demanding that fiction do better, because women deserved better: I deserved better.

Boy-meets-girls novels adapted: the female protagonists started to save themselves, fight their own battles, and meet love interests who were actually attractive, inside and out. After so many years of a barbed fantasy of love, these stories hit different, and I realized I had never actually stopped being a romantic – but I had finally stopped being hopeless. Instead, I had become hopeful. An unequivocally hopeful romantic. Now I love nothing more than escaping into a boy-meets-girl story, knowing that the girl might just have a happily ever after, after all. These are just a few of my favorite stories from this new era.

With The Fire On High by Elizabeth Acevedo

Teenage moms often get a bad rep, and there are few (if any) boy-meets-girl story-lines that center around a teenage mom meeting a kind fellow high school student who pursues her in the most respectful way, without crossing boundaries, and isn't scared off by her being a mother. Until now. In **The Fire on High**, Afro-Latino teenager Emoni Santiago has a passion for food, and dreams to raise her daughter and work in a kitchen. The sweetest high school boy slowly woos her, and their romance is a little bit sweet and spicy. Acevedo's poetic writing is the icing on the cake in this story, which I ate up, and it left a big grin on my face.

The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue by V.E. Schwab

Love, especially for romantic souls, can be the guiding light in a raging sea, the tether that brings us back from the brink of destruction. Melodramatic, perhaps, but if you like your boy-meets-girl story to be the kind that epic love songs are sung about, *The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue* is that story. An immortal woman and reclusive bookshop boy meet in a twist of fate, star-crossed lovers thrust together in a heart-pounding tale. I loved the audio book, its melancholic undertones and musings on the life-saving nature of love, swept me away and soothed my heart.

The Starless Sea by Erin Morgenstern

Everlasting love depicted by two souls destined to be together, lifetime after lifetime, makes me breathe out a dreamy sigh. And in **The Starless Sea**, the boy-meets-girl love is exactly that – a love that transcends time itself. Their souls find each other again and again, which is a beguiling and hauntingly beautiful interpretation of love that leaves me weak at the knees. Although the boy is actually more of an old soul, he has the level of respect that should be a mandatory dating requirement. And their romance? Well, you'd have to read it to find out.

Mexican Gothic by Silvia Moreno-Garcia

I'm bored of being told / need saving, and that it's a man who needs to be the one who saves me. In **Mexican Gothic**, Noemi Taboada is the heroine of my dreams. She wears chic 1950's glam while fighting the horrors (from eugenicians to serious damp and mushrooms) in a spooky candlelit mansion. And, as it turns out, it's the boy she meets that needs saving (and her cousin, who has been cruelly conditioned as I was to be weak and submissive), and Noemi is a heroine that does it in style. She embodies the feminine and the fierce. Queen.

The Ten Thousand Doors of January by Alix E. Harrow

When I was younger, I craved adventure and rejected the assertion by anything stamped "only for boys". The patriarchy has a lot to answer for, so **The Ten Thousand Doors of January** was the fiercely feminist middle finger up that I applauded. The women are bold, strong, adventurous, and although men in power try to silence them, they simply won't be silenced. Their love interests embrace, and love, their adventurous spirits, and don't try to hold them back from that voice inside of them that calls out for adventure, even when it could be dangerous. And honestly? That's the kind of man that truly excites me.

A River Enchanted by Rebecca Ross

Enemies-to-lovers romance is a romantic subplot that I crave, but only when it's done right, where the boy-meets-girl are equally matched in their snark and witty banter ("witty" being the key word). *A River Enchanted* captures that message in measures and measures. It's set in a quasi-fictional Scotland with an ever-changing landscape, two at-odds clans and magic weaved into plaids. Without spoiling anything, this romance is the stuff of epic songs passed down through generations. Their sarcastic retorts are *chefs kiss*.

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DEAR YOUNG GIRLS, ARIEL IS NOT A ROLE MODEL

by Sophia Li

If you've ever remembered swooning over the romantic relationship of Prince Eric and Ariel, you're not alone. For the millions of young girls who grew up watching Disney movies, these princesses are their ultimate role models. Children dream of being the conventionally attractive, white staples of Disney, only to have their breath taken away by a knight in shining armor. Kids and parents alike all love princess culture, and that is the problem. Although these movies often carry a positive connotation, the impact of Disney princess culture poses more harm than good.

Underneath the scripted screen text, young girls subconsciously pick up on the physical appearances of Disney princesses and compare themselves to a fictional and unrealistic standard of beauty. For instance, Cinderella is depicted as a fair-skinned, blonde, and skinny woman, whereas her antagonistic step sisters have darker complexions. To examine the implications of princess beauty standards on young girls, sociologist Charu Uppal asked 63 girls to draw their definition of a princess. Uppal found that 61 out of 63 girls drew a light-skinned one, much like those present in Disney films. Of the 63 total participants, not a single child drew their own cultural garments and features when depicting princesses, choosing to replace them with more Eurocentric traits. From an early age, Disney has colonized the minds of young girls and instilled the idea that to be beautiful, look like a light-skinned princess first.

Beyond perpetuating a harmful standard of beauty, princess culture is nearly always hyper fixated on the importance of physical attractiveness. 94% of Disney movies comment on physical attractiveness, with each film mentioning feminine beauty ideals between 0 to 114 times. Since princesses are known as the elites in society and the stereotypical "golden" standard, if children recognize that their physical appearance is different from what is portrayed on screen, then they forever feel lesser than. The extreme fixation on the appearance of young girls undeniably has a correlation with mental health challenges, such as body dysmorphia and lower self esteem. When children become acquainted with an irrational epitome of beauty, they become trapped in a self-deprecating cycle of comparison. A study done by Drs. Sharon Hayes and Stacey Tantleff-Dunn concluded that a third of girls under the early age of 6 expressed concerns about being overweight. When asked to choose their definition of a "real princess", half of the participants chose the thinnest option. It is not that just one princess fits the size zero body type. It is not that just one princess has Eurocentric beauty features. It is that Disney princess culture has a recurring pattern time and time again of excluding plus size characters, besides demonizing them as grotesque antagonists.

Even further, Disney deliberately creates a stark distinction between the attractiveness of fortunate protagonists and ill-fated villains. In both facial features and body type, Ariel is sculpted to fit the societal standard of beauty: fair skinned, thin, and white. The antagonist, Ursula, possessed more socially unacceptable traits, such as a larger figure and eerie tentacles. Belle was praised to be the "the most beautiful girl in town, and that makes her the best." Essentially, Disney waters down the value of a woman to her physique and sends a message to young girls that to be fortunate in life, be beautiful first. It is ignorant to gloss over the problem of princess beauty standards in our modern society and deem it as "insignificant", especially when children across the world feel tied to the falsely perpetuated narrative that beauty is one-dimensional. Why is it that such highly praised movies are able to continue harming the esteems of young viewers without any checkback?

The harms of princess culture go far beyond beauty standards. Perhaps more importantly, Disney movies instill massively stereotypical ideas about gender roles and women obedience. Professor of Human Development Sarah M. Coyne conducted a year-long study on the impact of Disney princesses on gender stereotypes. The study showed that young girls who engaged in princess culture were more likely to act according to sexist gender norms. Given the way Disney illustrates women, these results are no surprise. In Ursula's notable song "Poor Unfortunate Souls", she explicitly tells Ariel to never "underestimate the power of body language" and "it's preferred for women to not say a word." Disney, especially in their most famous movies, portrayed women as stay-at-home caretakers and ill-equipped to traverse the real world. Cinderella was a maid, Belle was a kidnapped maid, and Snow White was a cleaner for the dwarves. As the quintessential princesses spend day and night cleaning, they never utter a word of discontent and remain complacent behind the walls of traditional womanhood. Disney shows the kitchen as a woman's only home, which is the exact same narrative that has hindered women from equal employment for decades.

When princesses are confronted with blatant inequality, their only sliver of hope seems to be reliant on the goodwill of a man. Aurora was put to sleep until a man came to kiss her, while Snow White would forever be in a "Sleeping Death" without a true love's kiss. But never forget: In order to receive the blessing of a prince in the first place, never use your voice and feed into narratives of self-sexualization to please men. If you want to even have a chance of being saved, be submissive, be beautiful, and be white. The very few "dominant" female characters that used their voice to influence others, such as Ursula, are painted as the menaces of society, creating a stark contrast between the likability of a stereotypical quiet girl and a woman who speaks her mind.

Another key problem within Disney films that is hardly talked about is heteronormativity. Heteronormativity refers to a culture or attitude that romantic partners should always be of the opposite sex. It should come as no surprise that every single Disney princess ended up with a charming man, and the idea of a heterosexual couple is overly glorified. Young viewers not only see straight couples as the only socially acceptable orientation, but it alienates those who do not conform with the sexual majority. What about the bisexual girl who does not see them with a prince? The young boys who see them with a male instead? Those exact same princesses who represent heterosexual couples and idolized across the world are the same icons that perpetuate the idea that a righteous woman must always be in the arms of another man. Come on, Disney, where is the gender inclusivity?

Perhaps what is most disturbing about these Disney films is its constant reproduction. Year by year, princess films are being remade and flooding theaters to garner greater republic support, meaning the drawbacks of princess culture proceed to be magnified. Disney can continue to galvanize female supporters and impact the way they navigate the world. The more our society fails to hold Disney accountable, the more Disney can spread their "harmless" princess films into the marketplace through movie remakes. The more Disney can spread their "harmless" princess films into the marketplace, the more they push women into the trap of gender norms.

Beginning with Mulan and most recently depicted with Tiana and Moana, Disney has added more diverse representation within Disney princesses. While many argue that the wave of "progressive" princesses may prove to be beneficial for young girls, it is not enough to erase centuries of sexualization and stereotyping. There are two main reasons why.

First, when we think of quintessential princesses, we do not think of Moana, Mulan, or Tiana. Rather, our minds tend to think of Snow White, Ariel, and Cinderella. The stereotypical legacy of the most popular Disney princesses still exist, and these legacies tend to be the most harmful. Adding a few more diverse figures on screens does not change the fact that young girls will always have stronger ties with the original Disney princesses. For Disney to erase roots of racism and stereotyping, we need a much more structural change, such as utilizing profits to fund grassroots movements.

Disney can add as many new and diverse princesses as they wish, but it does not change the fact that the most popular and harmful princess movies (The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, etc.) are still being recreated. Princess animations were created around 1930, where segregation and inequalities were very extreme. Why can't we just leave all the sexism and stereotypes of Disney movies back in the time period where they belong? It is the 21st century, and why are we still flooding the theaters with sexist movies that created gender inequality in the first place? Unfortunately, a profit driven company like Disney will never go to true lengths of inclusivity, because toxic princess culture performs better in the marketplace. Toxic princess culture sells. As long as these original, sexist animations are still being recreated today, its legacy will never die off..

The reason why deep-rooted gender inequality exists at all does not stem from one colossal event that created disparities between groups of people. Rather, it's the bits and pieces of media and news our population absorbs that leads to divisive mindsets and corrupt power dynamics. The rising generation of women cannot afford to have one of the world's largest media conglomerates continually perpetuating the exact stereotypes that created gender inequality in the very first place. As America's society progresses to become more inclusive of different physiques and quirks, we must seriously evaluate what princess culture is teaching to the next generation. In order to alter societal perceptions, the media must first alter its rhetoric on the "golden standard" of a woman. The small bit of entertainment young girls get from Disney movies is not worth the devaluation that permanently impacts their self confidence and mannerisms. Our world is one that necessitates equality, yet the fostering of stereotypical gender norms and mannerisms among girls at a young age stunts opportunities for social reform. In the end, one thing has become increasingly clear: The footprints Disney left in its path to wealth are devastating multiple generations of young children.

Fortunately, more and more people are realizing the toxicity of Disney princess culture and beginning to call out its flaws. You can too. Parents, do not glorify these movies to your children. Make sure they understand why princesses are not their role model in life. For all Disney viewers, you are not worth any less just because you do not fit fictional beauty standards and mannerisms. Disney only shows what is most palatable to the dominating race and sexual orientation group, but that is entirely unrelated to your value as a unique individual.

The time to look in between the text and denounce its hidden messages is now.

The mentality that women **must** be complacent and make sacrifices for men in order to find love.

The mentality that a woman's value is inextricably linked to her attractiveness.

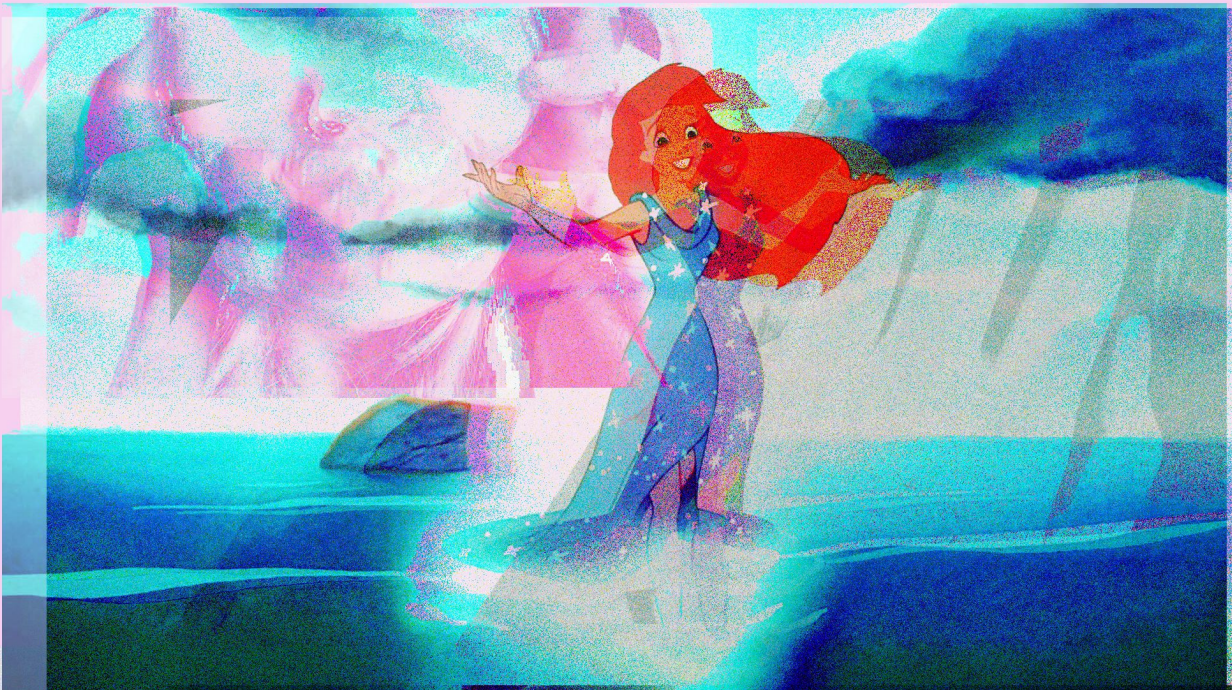
The mentality that plus size bodies are awful.

The mentality that only White is beautiful.

The mentality that women should be submissive. Complacent. Silent.

The mentality that no matter what, a woman is never enough.

Women do not need men to save them from dire conditions, or their "true-love's kiss", or their superficial heroism. As ice queen Elsa says best, "Let It Go."



By Patricio Fidenza

RuPaul's trans race

by Bon le Bon

Season 14 of **RuPaul's Drag Race** appeared on our screens way back in January this year. While many joke it appears to be the longest season ever (due to non-eliminations and bringing queens back), it is more importantly the most trans season of **Drag Race** to yet be shown. This may seem an obvious evolution to some, confusing to others, but regardless it is certainly a landmark. Let's unpack why this is so significant and also controversial.

Firstly, there have been trans women on **Drag Race** before. From the second season there have been trans women on the show; although many did not officially identify as trans during their time on the show, and others were forced to repress their identities while participating. Examples include Kylie Sonique Love from Season 2, Jiggly Caliente from Season 4, Monica Beverly Hillz from Season 5, and Gia Gunn from Season 6. Notably Peppermint of Season 9 was an out trans queen, but could not continue her hormone therapy and physical transformations. RuPaul has spoken out against women in drag saying that drag loses its impact when it's no longer men. Others on forums online and in discussions in real life say women have a biological advantage, and that for cis or trans women to be in the drag scene that they are invading a gay male space. There are also drag queens who are trans men; most famous is Gottmik, a contestant on Season 12. The discussion of transmen is glaringly quiet, as if they don't exist in the scene to be worthy of mention. This deserves a specific article-- for the purposes of this one, I will be discussing the reception to trans women drag artists .

But this does not correlate with actual drag history. While our modern day concept of a transperson may not have been explicitly stated by drag queens in the past, many frontrunners and activists in the LGBTQ+ community were trans women: Martha P. Johnson and Tamara Ching, notably. The pioneers of the ball room culture, Venus Extravaganza, Crystal LaBeija and Angie Extravaganza were trans women amongst many others. **Drag Race** would not exist without the efforts of these courageous women.

So back to today. Kerri Colby entered the competition workroom in her proud trans colours. Kornbread also entered, and although she left too soon due to an injury, she made a towering impact and most critics agree she was the most likely winner.

Their stories and energy allowed other queens to be comfortable sharing their own gender identity. Jasmine Kennedie came out in an emotional **Untucked** session. After filming the show, Bosco came out as a trans woman, and Willow Pill as non-binary/trans femme (some maybe uncomfortable with their depiction alongside transwomen, however part of their identity is feminine and there is no ill-intent or disrespect intended by portraying that).

The fans have reacted to these queens with almost overwhelming support. Memes of Kerri Colby as Thanos, with each of the queens that have come out as her 'infinity stones' have spread far and wide, so much so that Kerri herself wore a Thanos inspired look to the Season 14 finale. The series is now affectionately dubbed 'RuPaul's Trans Race' and many are asking "who's next?" to come out.

Many trans people are still wary of the show, and understandably. There is a misconception that there is no difference between drag queens and transgender women. Some argue the show continues to perpetuate this stereotype. In a reddit discussion, many trans women expressed they felt uncomfortable; the 'joke' of drag and in many of the judge's commentaries on **Drag Race** being that really it's a man in a dress! (*bah-dum-tiss*...). Trans women do not want to be perceived nor should they be seen as a campy dame. They want to be seen as full women, and the presence of queens can make this seem harder. In addition, there is a hard misogyny in some drag interpretations, with many of the gay male performers showing prejudice towards cis women, let alone trans women.

RuPaul historically has used many transphobic slurs-- the old video message to the queens in the workroom used to be announced as 'SheMail' (a pun on She Male, a slur), and RuPaul has a song called 'Trannychaser' which was played as recently as 2020 on **Canada's Drag Race**, which was jarring as this branch of the **Drag Race** franchise is extremely inclusive of different gender identities and the main judge Brooke Lynn Hytes makes it clear she believes all identities are welcome in drag.

As a queer non-binary person, who is usually quite happy to be perceived as a woman, my judgement of Drag Race is coloured by this. I have the privilege of having next to no straight friends, and the ones I have are extremely open minded and do not ever consider gender stereotypes. If they ever do, they listen and learn. However, this is not the case for all. Many queer people express their discomfort at hearing straight cis watchers of the show who misunderstand and fetishise the performers. Trans women complain about being asked "do you watch Drag Race?" or people instantly assuming they must like drag race, diminishing their identities as it suggests people see their gender identity and presentation as simply a character or a costume. Other queer people, however, cite drag as a medium that allowed them to explore aspects of their gender and realise their transness. It provides an 'acceptable' space to begin dressing as feminine in public for trans men, and gives them a space to exist when they do come out, regardless of whether or not they continue in drag.

While this issue will continue to be debated and analysed, with many having different opinions, I think it is important to remember one thing. These are trans women, being allowed to thrive, make bank, and be beautiful. They are inspiring teenagers who have easy access to such a mainstream show as **Drag Race**. Though these teens may not grow up to be trans, or even fans of drag, they are being exposed to another identity presented in a positive light. They may indeed see themselves and feel there is a future for them. The franchise, though flawed, allows this inclusion. More so abroad than in the US: Canada notably showcases Indigenous two-spirit queens and non-binary performers. Spain (**Drag Race Espana**) has trans men in the Pit Crew, and Inti, Hugaceo Crujiente, The Macarena, Arantxa Castilla LaMancha, and Jota Carajota are all non-binary trans queens.

In the Belfast scene there are at least half a dozen trans performers, and many more non-binary people. Though our drag is more boundary pushing than the 'glamour' drag seen on Drag Race, we are still inspired by the contestants of the Drag Race franchise and have shared in their expression and triumphs. Our own hometown queen, Blu Hydrangea came out as non-binary on **UK Versus The World**. As they say in their verse on RuPaul's "London" -- **'the future is bright'**.



By Mario Martinez

Off Meat and Men

by Ashley C. Jones

As women's rights continue to be stripped in increasingly fatal ways around the world, see the Missouri bill seeking to make it illegal to abort ectopic pregnancies (which never result in the birth of a living child and are potentially lethal to the mother), **Fresh** is a film that seems to have come along at the perfect time to make a commentary on how women are treated.

Categorized as a horror rom-com, **Fresh** is the type of horror feature that resides in the sort of grey area occupied by David Lynch films. The horrors portrayed are of an everyday nature. Perhaps avoidable, but all around us and constantly enduring because of the mundanity that comes along with normalization. Though on the surface, the Sebastian Stan and Daisy Edgar Jones starring production is about acannibal and the women he holds against their will, the lived experiences of women make it something that rings true in ways that, upon watching, become a little more insidious than they were before. Finally, a reason for women to be afraid.

Fresh uses thoughtfully conceptualized visuals like a mid-scene opening credit sequence that pulls us into the mental state of a drugged Noa - the main character played by Daisy Edgar Jones, shockingly little gore, and a decent script, to tell a story about what it means to be a woman in a world that sees and treats you as consumable. This story is told with the help of a near flawless soundtrack, which feels like a classic rom-com callback for someone who has seen few rom-coms, loved fewer, and counts Adam Sandler's **The Wedding Singer** (scored with multi-genre hits from the 80s) as the best of them all.

As Noa, Edgar Jones is a victim turned hero protagonist that we can root for. We see her suffering common place occurrences of modern day dating; subtle insults on a first date, unsolicited nudes on a dating app, and (to my mother's horror) paying for her own meal. "Good luck finding a guy, you stuck up bitch," is the response to Noa's disinterest in Chad, the aforementioned first date who sets the tone for Noa's attempt at a love life.

These sentiments are later echoed as we see her given fashion magazines with advice like "smile more" as she sits violated, abducted, and waiting to be cooked; already missing a slice of her anatomy. Held and captured by a man who plans to sell her to a market of one-percenters with a taste for human female meat, she faces a barrage of interactions that although not rare, present as especially chilling when audiences hear how naturally they fall into the dark context of the film.

Fresh is available to stream on Disney+

TO SUPPORT THE FIGHT FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS TO SAFE ABORTIONS CONSIDER SIGNING THE PETITIONS BELOW:

Texas: bit.ly/3KZACG5



USA: bit.ly/3vuJI78



EU: <https://bit.ly/36v7ck5>



For overall healthcare rights in the Dominican Republic: bit.ly/389IsOR



Art by ez [ezzakennebba.tumblr.com](https://www.tumblr.com/ezzakennebba)

Music is a Universal Language: A Transformational Journey from Tragedy to Triumph.

by Sonali Roy

"I may not be a better technician when this is all said and done, but I know I'll be a better musician."

-Lisa Spector, "Play On!" Coach for Musicians.

Brain motivates with the power of thinking, and heart helps relating the thoughts to the soul thus forming connectivity in between the living creatures and the Almighty. Every time you need not speak out through your voice because everything in the world has its own way of expressing itself in different settings. The way inputs from the core of your heart lead to a strong sense of expression and visualization, when it does not matter how you communicate- through written words, gesture, or instruments. Silence too speaks of thousand words as often our eyes do. So, whatever originates from heart creates a soothing symphony, a lullaby, or something to make you calm thus making you meditate, focus, and pondering over matters.

Let's talk about Lisa Spector of Half Moon Bay, a coastal community outside of San Francisco, who plays through fingers but, enjoys creating music with her heart. A professional & passionate musician, Spector, perceives, "I think all music is about opening your heart. It's what draws in listeners. Playing from your brain doesn't do the same." Music is her world. She has created playlists on her phone with music for creativity, focusing, de-Stress, sleep, and energizing, etc.

That Spector established herself as a pianopreneur, performer, educator, and "left hand virtuoso", she owes much to her mother, her first piano teacher. Spector reminisces, "From the very first moment I heard my mother play piano when I was seven, my fingers were a magnet to the keys. I didn't know how to play, I just knew I had to play." She continues, "...but when she recognized my talent early on, she sent me to a professional piano teacher. She became my biggest fan, driving me to countless piano lessons, concerts and competitions, and always quietly cheering me on."

An obsessively quiet child, Lisa, felt comfortable only with her piano. In her childhood days, she used to sit on the tan piano bench, the then safest place for her as she realized. When she was 11, Lisa used to practice piano for three hours daily upon her own choice. She observes, "I was so shy, I barely spoke. I didn't need to... my fingers were my voice."

Spector graduated from Juilliard and spent many years entering international piano competitions. She won the first place in the New York and Los Angeles Chopin Competitions. She also performed internationally in China, Poland, Spain, France, and Italy though upset that she never won the first prize in a prestigious competition that could upraise her pianist career to a significant position she always dreamed of.

She changed the track and concentrated on enriching lives with exceptional music, educating through joy and encouragement. She wanted to create a nurturing environment for musical expression. And Spector became an entrepreneur, and founded a school in Half Moon Bay area in 1997. She remembers, "I grew the school from one piano instructor (me) to a team of five faculty members teaching piano, voice, guitar, flute, and ukulele to students ranging in age from 4 to 94! (Yep, that's not a typo, Marge was 94!)."

After 14 years, she sold the school, though still runs into her former students. They introduce her to their partners, their dogs, and sometimes their children. This makes her happy. She utters, "It makes me smile from ear to ear when they tell me how much my love of music influenced their life. Looking back, music enhanced their life in ways I couldn't have planned for." Spector equally feels for humans and their nonhuman friends, which happens only with celestial involvement. She says, "Like the best things in life, it seemingly happened by accident, but looking back, I'd call it more of a divine intervention. When I owned a music school, I was studying the right prescription of music to calm and focus my class of 4-year-olds. I noticed that when I played a certain prescription of classical music, the 4-year-olds would be calm in no time. I was simultaneously a volunteer puppy raiser for Guide Dogs for The Blind. The same music that was helping the children had my 4-month old puppy snoozing in no time. That's the moment when I realized I was onto something."

That's why Spector co-founded Through a Dog's Ear. She created the business combining her music talents with her love of dogs. In February 2008, Through a Dog's Ear was launched on The CBS Early Show. This was one hour of music for dogs that grew into 16 albums of music for dogs and cats. She notes, "While I didn't graduate from Juilliard to perform for dogs and cats, it warms my heart and feeds my soul to use my music talents to help improve the lives of our beloved pets."

Her volunteer work with Peninsula Humane Society and SPCA in the San Francisco Bay Area motivated Spector to initiate and lead the "Music In Shelters" program.

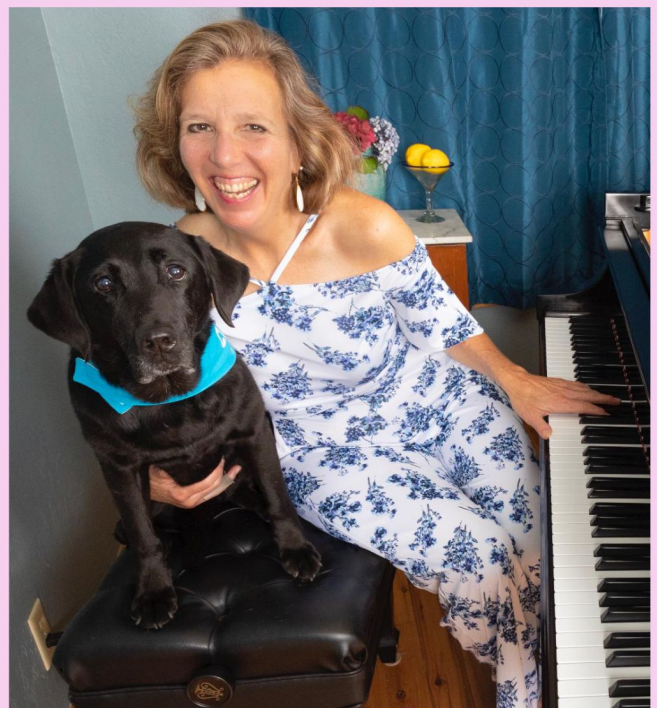
But, life is not a bed of roses. And we never know when life puts us to test whether we can survive or not. The musical career of Lisa for more than 40 years came to the verge of end on June 27, 2017. She shares, "My world came crashing down on me when I tripped over a curb in a shopping center. I tried to catch myself, but all of the sudden I was on the hard, cold cement pavement looking at my right hand ring finger screaming. It looked so deformed I thought it must have fallen off. My finger was crushed, and so was my soul."

In between June 2017 and October 2019, Spector faced two immediate surgeries to heal seven complicated fractures, an unexpected bone slip between surgeries and was also diagnosed with Complex Regional Pain Syndrome or CRPS. A medical professional told her that she would never play piano again. She was in utter despair, received trauma therapy and went through successful alternative therapies to treat CRPS. Spector underwent two more surgeries to increase range of motion. She used to practice hourly hand stretches and sleep with customized hand splints. She also got accustomed to her hand paraffin wax bath. During a consultation, her hand surgeon said, "You've been through so much, and you do it all with a smile and an attitude of gratitude. I hope you write a book when this is all said and done."

In the meantime, in 2018, Spector left Through a Dog's Ear, when her recordings were being played in over 1,500 shelters worldwide along with vet clinics and pet households thus leading to increase adoption rates.

But, the recovery was easy neither emotionally nor physically. During the phase, Lisa used to perform only with her left hand sharing her story of resilience. She also learnt how to minutely concentrate on the improvements of her hand. During the frequent visit, her hand therapist encouraged her every time by saying "Little by little". She came back to music for left hand only, but did not see herself as a one-handed pianist, "...and it took at least half a year before those notes turned into music", Spector utters. Apparently, she thought music generated from her fingers, but gradually realized music originated from her heart. On learning the Brahms arrangement of the Bach Chaconne for violin, Lisa burst with joy and gratitude. "I was teary knowing I would have never discovered this breath-taking music as a two-handed pianist", she expresses her feelings. In course of time, she got the picture that her therapist once inspired by saying "Little by little". Yes, she gradually added her right hand to her left while performing. Fortunately, she is now performing with both of her hands.

For more of Lisa's work, visit her website
lisaspector.com





To explore more of Ana-Rosa's art, visit bombshellpinupart.bigcartel.com



"My Bombshells are inspired by my love of vintage glamour and my belief that every woman has an inner bombshell just waiting to come out! All body shapes can rock the pin-up look so it completely embraces body positivity.

I create my girly characters to express my own flirtatious outlook on life & to tantalize the vintage pin-up lover. I love using a retro color palette along with leopard, cherries, and polka dot prints to capture the essence of bygone eras I love. There's a Pop Art influence in the mix. My Bombshells celebrate womanhood with a kittenish vibe that is both vintage and modern, altogether timeless. - AnaRosa



Lend me your voice: parasocial technology in *Belle* and *Perfect Blue*

By Sam Moore

For better or worse, Twitter exists. And one of the things that it's allowed people to do is to engage directly with the artists, musicians, writers, celebrities - often distinguished by an (in)famous Blue Check Mark - that use the platform. This kind of social media platform, the kind in which private and public spaces find themselves crashing into one another, creates a tension between a public figure and their audience, and a kind of direct connection and intimacy - or at least the illusion of one - that can create a parasocial relationship: a one-sided investment in an ostensibly two-sided relationship; one person expends emotional energy into it and the other doesn't. There's something about this kind of dynamic that feels unique to how people interact with celebrity - seeing what they want or need to see in another person's public persona - which becomes more potent when the apparent intimacy of a direct connection to a celebrity becomes available through technology and social media.

The relationship between celebrity, intimacy, and the potential for parasocial relationships has evolved along with technology and the increasingly immediate forms of connection that it offers. Taken side by side, Mamoru Hosoda's 2021 musical **Belle**, and Satoshi Kon's 1997 psychological horror **Perfect Blue**, capture not only the ways in which these relationships work but, given the almost fifteen year gap that exists between them, the ways in which the evolution of technology has also caused the idea of celebrity - and all that comes with - to evolve as well.

Perfect Blue exists in what feels like the infancy of the internet; it's a way to connect, but without the immediacy or directness of social media as its used and understood in the 21st century. In fact, what's most striking about its relationship with privacy is that it takes secrets and intimacies from the physical world and uploads them onto the physical one, creating a kind of bastardised, bad faith connection between J-pop idol turned actress Mima Kirigoe, and her fans. The crux of this comes from her discovery of the website Mima's Room, a crude blog that features diary entries written in the voice and perspective of Mima, using details that - in theory - only Mima herself would know. It's telling that the existence of this website is revealed to her by a fan letter; the idea that Mima's fans will end up knowing her better than she knows herself. While this plants the seeds for the blurring identities and horror to come, it also captures something fascinating about people wanting from their celebrities: intimacy; to feel included in the lives of those they admire, adore, or worship, to be told things that not everyone will know. And technology becomes the vehicle for this.

Before discovering Mima's Room, there's a shot of Mima in her room, with her face reflected in a computer screen. **Perfect Blue** is obsessed with duality, and the uncertainty that arises from it, so to see Mima reflected - turned into a double - through the imagery of technology, shows the kind of reach that this duality can have. In **Perfect Blue**, these uncertain boundaries between the real and imagined don't just exist through Mima's instability, but through her celebrity as well; the idea that who she is becomes mediated through the fanbase that she interacts with. It's no wonder that one of the first things that happens after she moves away from being a pop star, and towards being an actress, is an exodus of fans who no longer like or approve of the image that she's creating herself. After all, the version of Mima that stars in the fictional thriller **Double Blind** - itself, as the title suggests, an exploration of duality and disassociation - isn't the one that they fell in love with when she was a member of CHAM! As her understanding of reality becomes uncertain, Mima sees a version of herself in her former idol costume, proclaiming "nobody likes you anymore, you're tarnished, filthy," and declaring herself "the real Mima." This shows reality as something in flux for a figure like Mima, whose sense of identity seems linked to the kind of celebrity that she holds, the image that she puts out into the world. It's as if the difference between clean-cut pop star, and edgy actress is the difference between truth and lies on an existential level.

For Mima to change like this is seen as betrayal; and that who she really is must align with the image projected onto her by fans. This takes a turn towards even darker territory when Me-Mania, who stalks Mima throughout the film, attempts to sexually assault and murder her - acting on instructions from the alleged "real Mima," telling him to eliminate "the imposter" - something born from what he sees as a relationship with Mima, who calls him "the only one I can depend on." When he assaults Mima, he claims that "the real Mima emails me every day" a sign of how dark obsession and projection with celebrity can become, a question of what kind of intimacy and connection can really exist between celebrities and those who follow their lives.

Hosoda's **Belle** couldn't be more different from **Perfect Blue**. Hosoda's film is optimistic and almost utopian, as opposed to the darkness and uncertainty in Kon's dark thriller. But they share interesting DNA and thematic concerns, which they express not only through wildly different stories and outlooks, but also the kind of technology they use, and how the characters relate to it.

Belle is, on the surface, a riff on **Beauty and the Beast**, but rather than using magic, curses, and talking crockery, it uses pop stars, virtual reality, and a fascinating dynamic of how projection works. The heart of **Belle**'s narrative exists in U; a virtual reality world that anyone can enter into via a smartphone app, that lets them become a new, better version of themselves. Where **Perfect Blue** captures cyberspace in its infancy, **Belle** explores what one of its futures might look like. What's striking about this future is just how much it looks like the present day.

The eponymous Belle is the VR persona of Suzu Naito, a high school student who loses the ability to sing following the traumatic loss of her mother. But in the world of U, her voice returns and she can sing just like she used to. In time, Belle becomes a celebrity in the world of U - there are some newscasts that capture the rising and falling fortunes of its virtual reality idols - and this success is fascinating for the ways in which it seems to stop Belle from being herself. The idea of the self for Belle exists in two distinct ways: her IRL life as Suzu, and her digital one as an idol. U creates a space for experimentation with identity - there are plenty of denizens who don't have human forms - and it raises the question of what a "true" identity looks like; if Suzu is able to be more herself in U because it's a platform that gives her her voice back. One ends up informing the other; where the IRL Suzu offers a singing voice for Belle to (re)claim in U, it's this virtual persona that is able to give Suzu an inner strength that finds its way into the real world. One needs the other, and this creates a unique tension when it comes to how the persona of Belle is perceived, and how the nature of technology impacts the ways in which people relate to her.

There are several sequences where Belle essentially travels through U in disguise - a large formless cloak and scarf - because when she's seen, she's inevitably mobbed by fans. It takes the kind of ravenous immediacy that social media stans seem to demand of the objects of their affection, and turns it into something visceral and physical. And when she disappears from U for a while, upon her return - again, in disguise - sees countless signs and billboards emblazoned with the phrase "I miss you Belle."

One of the songs in **Belle** - because, like **Beauty and the Beast**, it's a musical - is 'Lend Me Your Voice,' a ballad about connection, intimacy, and letting down your guard. It's the inviting tone of these lyrics - "Lend me your voice/the voice you try so hard to hide/let me see it/your heart that is hidden" - that has echoes of the strange relationships that exist in both **Belle** and **Perfect Blue**. It's easy to look at these lines from **Belle** and understand the kind of connection that they can offer to a listener: the singer is literally asking for them to open up about the truth of their feelings. It's this dynamic that reveals how people are able to project themselves and their desires onto a figure like Belle. In **Perfect Blue**, the same thing happens with Mima; the songs that she sings, and the visual persona that accompanies her performance in CHAM! offer a kind of blank slate - something that exists even more prominently in **Belle**, through both the music, and the anonymity of the singer herself - a slate that becomes writ large once it makes contact with cyberspace; in the digital realm, physical proximity and real life contract to someone like Mima or Belle no longer matters. Instead, something like Mima's Room can appear, and someone - whether or not they're the real Mima - can generate these connections themselves. Cyberspace is thorny and complicated in both films - while it seems broadly optimistic on the surface in **Belle**, its anonymity and safety are fraught - acting as both the blank screen that mirrors Mima's face in **Perfect Blue**, and a vast, mutating world, in which the meaning of a persona can change when someone looks at it in a new light.

THE REAL WORKING HERO: BOOKS ABOUT WORKERS

By Velvet Opus

We often read fiction to understand the world around us, or to see things from a different perspective. At least, I know I do. When I was an employee in an office, I read stories about other office workers, wondering if their (fictional) lives were any different from mine. Better, perhaps. Because I quickly learned that asking colleagues questions about anything from their pay grade, to that incident-that-was-swept-under-the-rug was heavily frowned upon. Employers preached that us workers had rights, but the reality was very different. And I felt perpetually fearful of my job status given this power imbalance, so I turned to fiction to find answers to my questions instead.

After a lot of reading and soul-searching, I discovered that employment wasn't for me. The power imbalance struck a chord within me, and I knew that the constraints of employment stifled my creativity. These mythical workers rights I had been promised were almost non-existent, and I felt that as long as I turned up to work, punctual and obedient, that is all that was needed of me. So, I quit my job and changed careers entirely.

I still read fiction about workers, because I am curious about the experience of other workers in the same or vastly different situations. Because all workers are different. Even if we share, or have shared, the same types of struggles, our individual stories will be unique.

These are some of the novels I have read recently, which either touch on workers' rights or tackle them outright. They are mostly contemporary, examining the modern-day workplace and not only workers' rights, but also how life as a worker impacts us outside of work.

The Woman in the Purple Skirt by Natsuko Imamura (2019)

We often compare ourselves to others. Do they have a better job than us? Would I be happier if I were them? That's the question of Imamura's intriguing novel, which features a woman who obsesses over the woman in a purple skirt, and craves nothing more than to be her. Our protagonist is a background character in her own life, with her superiors treating her like a worker ant. I have been this woman, secretly obsessing over my colleagues and the better lives I imagine they have. In reality, this is unlikely true, but at work we are often lauded for being outwardly positive, even when inwardly we are deeply unhappy.

Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine by Gail Honeyman (2017)

Eleanor's story is incredibly sad, but an all-too close reality for so many people. She is a good worker in the eyes of her employer. She is punctual to a fault, completes all her work, and never has a day off sick. She's also unknowingly lonely, but her skills as a worker are valued above her happiness as a person. So often do we spend so much of our time trying to please our employees when they would turn their backs on us in a heartbeat, because to many employers, our value lies in our productivity, not in our life satisfaction.

The Cabinet by Un-su Kim (2021)

Although a lot of Kim's novel veers into the unusual, with a cabinet containing files of people with extraordinary powers (like a man turning into a ginkgo tree), the story itself is a deep reflection of the mundanity of office life. In his job, Mr. Kong often finds himself without anything to do. Instead of celebrating that he is paid for nothing, the unremarkable nothingness of his days becomes unbearable, and yet he doesn't leave. It says a lot about the power our employers have over us, that even when work is unfulfilling, we don't leave.

Nightshift by Kiare Ladner (2021)

Ladner's novel follows a woman in her early 20's in London, who decides to become a night shift worker. Her reason is interesting. She becomes obsessed with an office coworker, who is switched to the night shift – and she impulsively gives up everything to join her. Not only does the novel hone in on the unnatural working and sleep patterns of night-shift workers, but it also gives a glimpse of what London's working nightlife is really like, and the reactions that our loved ones have to us working outside of what is considered "normal" working patterns.

Detransition, Baby by Torrey Peters (2021)

Equality is one of the key workers' rights, and Peters looks at what that means when it comes to the LGBT+ community. Ames has detransitioned, and is having a love affair with his boss, who isn't aware of his journey. Deadnaming at work is a very real issue, as are the secret love affairs between bosses and their employees, which can have severe repercussions. Many workplaces preach equality, but they are so far detached from the reality of what that means for their workers, especially those from marginalised groups like Ames.

The Peculiar Life of a Lonely Postman by Denis Theriault (2005)

We often find in difficult periods of our life that our employers don't actually care about us personally, but rather what we can produce. When Theriault's protagonist quietly goes about his work, his superiors don't bother him. It is clear that he is lonely, completely alone in fact, which leads to him reading the mail of the people on his postal round. It is only when he starts acting outside the work role demanded by his colleagues and employer, that anyone notices. And by then, as is often the case, it is simply too late.

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood (1985)

The plot of this story will be familiar to many after its adaptation for television, but it is the start that intrigues me. When legislation is changed and bosses tell their female employees that "women aren't allowed to work anymore", the women protest, but unsurprisingly perhaps, the men don't. Women who refuse to leave are escorted off the premises by armed forces. It is an instance of rights being taken away, and other workers silently watching it happen. Not only is this terrifying, but it is also an accurate reality of the tenuous thread of "equal rights" and how workers' rights don't work for all workers, at all.

AND FOR NON FICTION LOVERS...

By Bon le Bon

A History of America in Ten Strikes by Erik Loomis (2018)

Focusing on workers' actions from 1830 to 1990, with present day allusion, a fresh and exciting way to tell history and understand the greater context to unions, while showing how people in every time and across every profession all can relate to the same struggle and be inspired by their shared victories.

On the Line: A Story of Class, Solidarity, and Two Women's Epic Fight to Build a Union by Daisy Pitkin (2022)

Written by one of the labor organisers, this is the exhilarating tale of an arduous struggle. Daisy makes sure to highlight her co-'conspirator', Alma Gomez Garcia and the many immigrant women whose contributions made the union possible. It is not a fairytale; the inter-movement conflict and diverging perspectives based on background is shown. But overall it is an amazing field book on how to organise.

What it's like in an old people's home

By Veronica Leigh

I was in the doorway of a resident's room when I heard a woman's raspy voice pleading for help. I stepped out into the hall and found a woman in her wheelchair, pale, eyes unfocused, two feet from the nurse. The nurse was at the medicine cart, bobbing her head to the music she was playing on her computer.

"Please, I'm thirsty." The woman smacked her lips.

I waited for the nurse to react but nothing happened. I spoke to the resident loudly, in hopes of catching the nurse's attention, but she was focused on her music. I got the woman a cup of water and had to help her drink.

When she was finished, the woman began to moan and grabbed her lower abdomen. "It hurts!" She whimpered, her head falling back.

Still, the nurse did not respond.

"Hey, she's in pain! She needs help!" I snapped.

The nurse turned to the resident and began to examine her. "Oh, her oxygen tank is out of oxygen again. That sometimes happens to her."

A CNA fetched the resident, to lay her down, and fill up her oxygen tank. It was midday and God only knows how long that poor woman was without oxygen.

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"Hey, can you come clean a bed and the floor? There's urine on it." A nurse asked me.

I headed over with my cleaning cart and began to scrub the mattress and mop the floor. Finding urine and feces on a mattress or the floor is not uncommon. No big deal.

"It's so wrong. This poor girl." The nurse said.

She was right. The resident was young, she had a stroke, and was like an infant.

I nodded.

"The nighttime staff don't check on her or change her. She urinates and has to lay in it until we get here in the morning, and then it goes everywhere." The nurse explained.

I paused. I had lost count the number of times I had entered the room and smelled the urine and stepped on the sticky floor. I had shrugged it off as a messy room, not a sign of neglect.

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"I swear to God, I feel like smacking someone today!" a new cna grumbled out loud.

Not long after, a resident was in the dining room and stuck her hands in her depends. Her fingers were soon covered in feces. The nurse instructed the new CNA to clean the resident up.

As this new CNA was wheeling the resident down the hall, the resident reached out to touch the railing on the wall. The new cna sharply smacked the resident's hand. Thankfully the nurse witnessed it and reported this incident.

A particular resident was being contrary. It happens and this can cause stress. But who could blame her? She wanted her soiled depends changed ASAP. No one wants to sit in their own mess. The resident continued to press her call light and called out, refusing to wait.

The CNA lost her temper and yelled at the woman, "You are a Fucking Bitch!"

The resident was so upset, she wheeled herself down the hall, without her oxygen, sobbing hysterically. She begged whoever she encountered – included me - to help her get to her daughter. She made it as far as the front door and attempted to push her way out when another employee entered.

The employee and I tried to reason with her, to coax her back inside. The nurse intervened, promising to call her daughter, and she allowed herself to be taken back to her room.

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I was out in the hall when I heard a resident cough. I glanced up and soon realized it was more than a cough. She was eating her lunch and had begun to choke.

"Someone, help! Anyone! She's choking, please!" I screamed.

A nursing home is a noisy place, but the other housekeeper and the other residents were able to hear me. Yet the nurse and CNA were too distracted by their conversation to pay any mind.

I screamed louder and then the other housekeeper began to shout too.

Our screams caught the nurse and cna's attention. They rushed to the resident. Thankfully, the Heimlich Maneuver was performed and everything came up. The nurse had to report the incident, which was understandable, and went to the desk. The cna should have stayed to comfort the resident. Instead, she walked off.

The resident was red-cheeked and had begun to cry. She was confused and scared.

I knelt down beside her chair, and squeezed her shoulder. "We love you. It's going to be okay. I promise."

The CNA returned and it occurred to her that she should change the resident's clothing, since it was covered with vomit.

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By Myria

[fiver.com/myriax](https://www.fiver.com/myriax)

Some residents spit. It's not sanitary, but it's not the worst thing in the world.

One sweet old lady was prone to spitting and did it often.

"Hey, don't spit!" A nurse once shouted at her.

"I'm not spitting."

"Yes, you are. You're disgusting."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know."

"Don't be sorry! Just don't do it!"

Minutes later the old lady thankfully had no memory of the nurse calling her disgusting and she returned to spitting wherever she pleased.

There was a history of neglect of one woman. Why, I'll never know, because she was sweet as pie. But she wasn't taken for showers and her clothes weren't changed. Everyone complained: from the family, to therapy, activities, social services...Finally a manager from a separate department intervened and got results... for a while.

The woman took a turn for the worse, she was dying and in extreme pain. To take her out of the bed was excruciating, but a bed bath or something could have been done. Nothing was and it came to the point that she continually reeked of filth and her own urine and flies buzzed around her. I reported it to State. From then on, she received the care that was due her.

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I was cleaning a sink when I heard a thud on the other side of the wall. At first, I thought someone accidentally bumped into it or dropped something. But I heard it off and on for fifteen minutes or so. I followed the noise into the room next door and on into the bathroom. Our one-hundred-year-old resident was perched on the toilet, beating her little fist on the wall.

"Hey, I've been here for a while. I'm done."

I looked and she had turned on the bathroom's call light, but no one had come to help her.

I went out to the nurse's station and spoke to the nurse about it. It may not be a nurse's job to toilet residents or assist them the way a cna would, but I had thought that with the recent celebration they had for this one-hundred-year old's birthday, that the nurse might make an exception.

"Yeah, we know, okay! I can hear her." She snapped, remaining in her chair. "She's just going to have to wait."

I returned to the resident. "They're coming, I promise."

That was a lie. It was another fifteen minutes before a cna tended to her. Another fifteen minutes of the resident beating on the wall, crying out for help, and being ignored.

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It was 12:30pm, the resident's lunch hour and I was walking past the empty dining area. Due to a mini-outbreak of covid, the residents couldn't gather in groups and they had to eat in their rooms. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a resident outside in the patio area off of the dining room. She had advanced dementia, however, she loved going outside. Officially, residents could go outside if they were accompanied by an employee. However, the staff often let the residents – in various stages of dementia and health issues – out into the patio on their own.

Someone had let the resident outside but hadn't brought her in for lunch.

I rushed out and brought her back inside. I pushed her to the nursing station and told them where I had found her.

"I didn't know she was out there." The nurse said.

"Oh, I brought her out and forgot her." The cna admitted.

I was told her tray was waiting for her in her room. They brought her her lunch, yet it never occurred to them she wasn't there to eat it.

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AMBITION VERSUS REALITY

By Chikarem Obi

A follow up to Chika's fitness journey as told in our last issue, with a sad ending

Working out still remains one of my hobbies. As much as it can be stressful, I have made it a point of duty to exercise as much as I can. And I cannot forget my early morning workout experiences. Initially, it was challenging. But driven by the goal to get fit and remain so, I soldiered on.

"What type of punishment is this?" I asked myself on several occasions. But remembering that if the routines were actually a series of punishments, then it was something I certainly brought upon myself, I kept my cool. As far as I remembered, I was not coerced into the fitness journey. Also, standing before the mirror and seeing my biceps increase in size, I resolved not to give up, at least not so early.

I went back to the treadmill, the dumbbells, barbell and kettlebell, and any other equipment I could lay my hands on.

Now that I wholeheartedly have taken the discomforts as one of the hurdles to cross in my fitness journey, I can say that the tenacity has paid off. It is still doing so. The benefits are such that I can't deny. Even if I try to dismiss them, what I see when I take off my shirt before the mirror, will make me be truthful to myself. Aside from that, my breath after a brisk walk, a shuttle run or an energy-draining activity, attests to the benefits.

You no longer breathe like one being given a hot chase," one of the folks with whom I played football said. At that point, I knew I was no longer as fragile as before. If you want to hear such testimonies about yourself; kit up and sweat it out. I could share some tips with you, if you won't be shy to ask.

More so, I further learnt the lesson of perseverance and endurance, as I hit the street early in the morning for my jogging. Some places appeared as distant as the sun from the earth. Aiming to run to those places initially appeared like the aspiration of a drunk. Especially when I was gasping for air after I had barely taken off. I recall on a particular day, when I made an attempt to run with a friend to a junction, 2 kilometres away from our family house. Ah! It was far from a funny experience. In fact, I almost hated that fellow for letting me jog that far. Though I might claim to have run to that place, the reality was that I staggered most of the time, with my hands on my waist, and with the panting of one pursued by a wild bull dog.

"Come on, let's jog a little further," the fellow said to me.

"No way!" I managed to reply, with a wave that said much more than that. He ran along and I dared not look in his direction. But as I stood there, I felt as though my legs were much more disappointed than myself, such that I felt I wasn't in control of them anymore. But after standing there for a while, I set in the direction of my house, when I felt I had taken control of my breath and stamina once again.

"We'll go again some other time," I encouraged myself as I walked back home.

As it is in my nature not to give up so easily, I made several attempts to jog to that junction. On those occasions, I went alone, because I didn't want to be pressured by anyone. I failed severely. But I kept on with the attempt, till I could comfortably run past that point, and even beyond the road leading to the state correctional facility. That was more than 2 kilometres away from the junction which initially I could barely run to. That progress was a big boost to my morale.

"If I could do that, then I could do a lot more than I'm currently doing."

I began to apply that perseverance to my numerous lofty goals in life. That was how my simple fitness journey rubbed off on my day-to-day life. Maybe if I didn't push myself the way I did during those early days of jogging, I might not have been able to put down this piece, at this time and with the needed details.

Furthermore, I cannot talk about my fitness journey, without mentioning my friend, whose name I will leave as P. A hairstylist who was out to make something meaningful out of his life. Though I hit that particular gym a few weeks before he came around, his dedication amazed me. He would start his workout for the day before I arrived and would remain there even after I was done for the day. His gym goals were intimidating.

"Are you sure you can do this?" I asked. P would only smile at me. I could see veins running across several directions on his face, as he lifted some weight, while lying on the bench.

"Take it easy, guy."

I should have minded my business right? Well, I couldn't help but notice the difficulty with which he initially lifted that weight. He was new there after all.

P and I began talking, after we played soccer together close to the complex where the gym is located. He was in my team. And we began talking more often, because both of us were usually among the first set of people to arrive at the gym each morning. In addition to that, we shared the same dream of body-building. We didn't just want to be fit, we equally wanted to have chiseled bodies. Even if not exactly that, but something more impressive that we had at that moment. So that day, I showed my friendliness by not reserving my comment over the difficulty with which he lifted that weight. You know what? P was never bothered. So, I kept my cool, as I continued with my regime. He would mock me, whenever he saw me on the treadmill.

"Leave that place and come join us." He said to me, pointing at the guys who were engulfed in the weights they were lifting. Their faces were all squeezed and none of them had the faintest smile on their faces. I chuckled at my friend, without saying a word. I doubt you would have any words to say after you've spent a couple of minutes racing on the treadmill. My friend simply hated the line of least resistance— he loved challenges. I guess that was why he told me that.

But back then I was following my routine and only joined them when I was done warming up on the mill.

P never ceased to amaze me. As much as I denied it, I was encouraged by his guts and tenacity.

"I will be able to lift that soon," he pointed at one of the heaviest dumbbells in the room.

"Ahh!" I couldn't hide my disbelief. "But you just got registered here. How is that possible?"

"Don't worry," he replied, with a smile.

"My brother, carry the most you can fit." I wasn't less ambitious myself, but was only feeling pity for a friend.

"Small, small," he said.

At that point, I had to leave him. But before he could hit his target, P was evicted from the complex where the gym was located. That meant that he no longer had access to the gym.

As I got to know P better, I discovered he was quite ambitious. From all indications, he came from a humble background where everyone started fending for themselves from an early age. Maybe that was why he couldn't proceed to the university— that's if he ever finished secondary school. All that didn't really matter to him; he looked forward to a better life. He was a good hairstylist. Folks who had had him style their hair, attested to the neatness of his work.

"He learnt the work well," they commented.

Having come from the riverine part of Nigeria, to the South Eastern part of the country, he was convinced he had gotten a good platform to soar. I don't know how excellent his morals were, but I discovered he didn't want to make it the wrong way. He truly believed in what he could do. And I believed him too.

But I was very sad when I noticed how fallen his countenance was, when he came to the gym one morning.

"What's up bro? Why do you look this dull?" I enquired.

"Nothing bro," he replied.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes bro," he assured me.

But I was not convinced. Though I was so carried away with what I was doing, that I barely took notice of his disposition afterwards. As much as I could recall, that was on a Saturday morning. So at about 9am that morning, I left the gym for my house, so I could attend to other issues of the day.

The following week, I hit the gym. Surprisingly, P was nowhere to be found.

"Maybe, he is busy with something. P would definitely come around." I thought. It was around 7:30 am then. I continued with what I was doing and would probably call him when I got back to the house. I couldn't remember coming with my phone. I worked out till it was time for me to go. It was around 9:15 am then. If P was ever going to come around, then it might be in the evening. Even though I doubted that my friend would prefer to come in the evening, instead of the morning, when he usually came. Before leaving, I had to confirm that he wasn't in his workspace then. In fact, he hadn't been at the complex at all that day. I was rather too tired to begin to figure out the possible reasons my friend wasn't at the gym that day. Some folks were talking in whispers as I walking away, but I was indifferent to that.

I had walked a few metres from the gym complex, when I sighted someone in a light-green sweater, with hair dyed like that of P. Moving closer, I confirmed he was the one.

"Guy, how far?" I greeted, as I came close to him

"I'm cool bro," he responded, though coldly.

"What happened? I didn't see you at the gym today and what are you doing here?" I asked obviously as one demanding quick answers.

P paused for a while, tightly biting his lips.

"What happened?" I asked once again. Yet he was still very slow to speak.

"Talk bro, talk."

It was then that he narrated his ordeal to me. Quite pathetic. He was accused of theft and was evicted from the accommodation given to him by his employers. And he had no other place to go to. He was totally stranded and had nothing to himself. So bad a condition! Unfortunately my pity wasn't enough to pay for all he had lost. Even if I could, I'm pretty sure that there was no way I could augment for the psychological trauma he was going through. Was it just about the pain and embarrassment that came with the accusation of theft? I doubt! I wasn't an investigator to ascertain his innocence. But from the way he spoke, you could only conclude he was innocent. What about the devastation that comes with the knowledge of a shattered dream? As much as I could, I encouraged him and helped in the little measure I could.

"Help me scout for work in any saloon within the area," P pleaded.

"I will bro," I assured him.

"So, will you be going back to your state?" I asked

"Not at all, I have come here to stay. I must surely make it," he spoke firmly.

"Take care bro," I said before leaving.

I left that place baffled over P's optimism, even in apparent despair.

"I must surely make it," he said with so much assurance. But as I pondered on those words, I became apprehensive. While his words showed great optimism, underneath them was a sense of desperation. Of course I know people could be boxed into corners wherein they resort to vices they had earlier condemned. That was the case with many young folks across the city. And their number was always on the increase.

"Let P not fall into that trap" I sincerely wished. His situation was really pitiable. For someone sleeping in a parked car, with nowhere to go to, it was easy to get into the wrong things out of desperation for survival.

About a week after I met P, I learnt of an opening for a hairstylist in a new salon somewhere in town. I tried calling him on his phone to inform him of that new opportunity, as I earlier promised, but his phone was switched off.

Oh, yeah, his phone was seized from him by his former employer. And there was no way I could reach him. I tried looking for him at the mechanics where I saw him last, but I didn't see him there. He probably moved.

Wherever P is right now, I just wish he is safe and still the optimistic guy I had known him to be.





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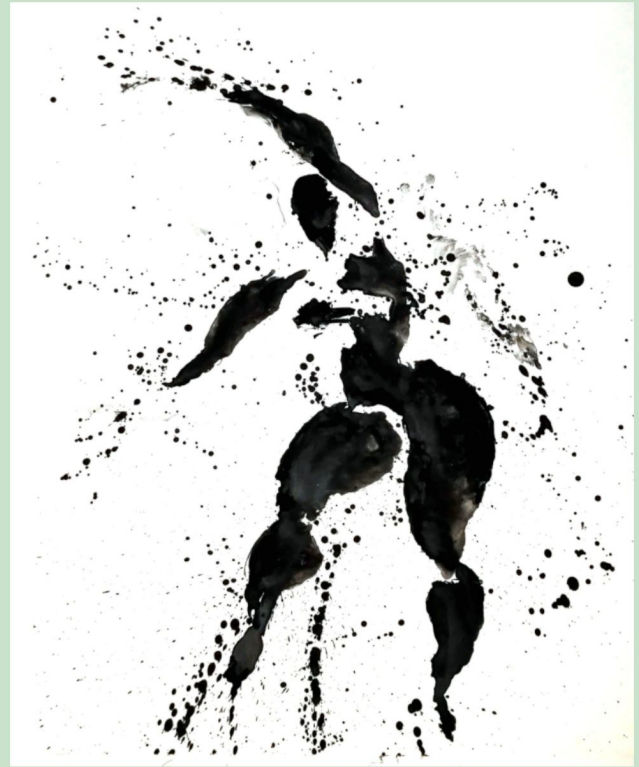
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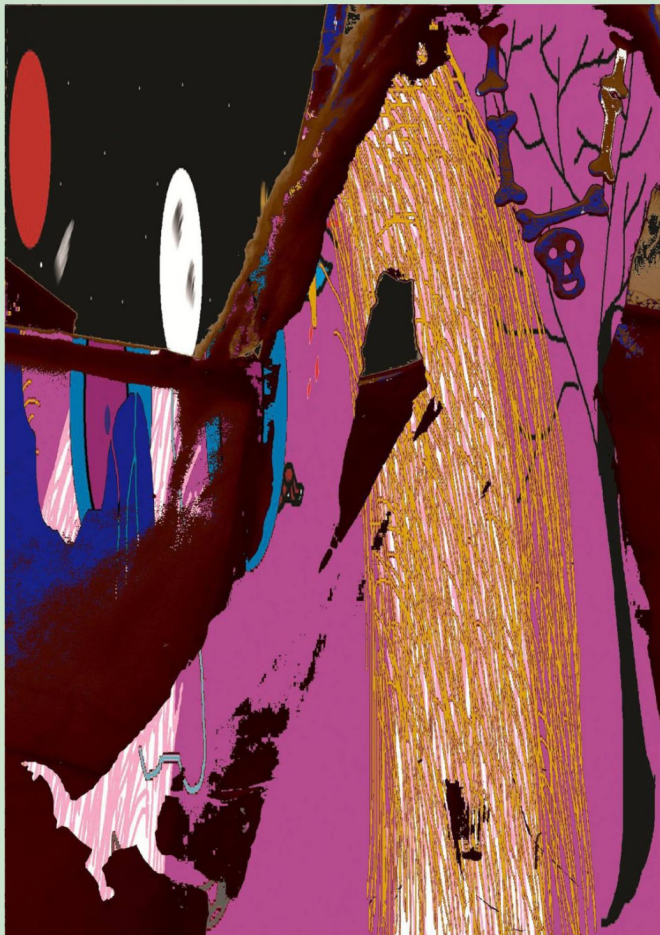
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