

Chapter I

“We only become what we are by the radical and deep-seated refusal of that which others have made of us”.

–Jean-Paul Sartre

I was born a female.

At a time when ultrasound wasn't accurate enough to determine a fetus's sex, and gender was rather predicted by heartbeat rate, as the lore goes, the oracle-obstetrician gave my mother the prophecy that I was either going to be a dumb boy or a smart girl.

I was born a female, and thus I was declared **“girl”**, but with a twist: I was also proclaimed **“smart”**.

But even when my sex was officially assigned, as the lore goes, and I was dressed as a proper baby girl with the pink and the skirts and the flowers, people would still mistake me for a boy.

My mother didn't like ribbons or polka dots so I skipped those. Maybe these were the marks that people were missing. In any case, and for whatever reason, since I was in my mother's belly and for quite some time after I had been exposed to direct sunlight for the first time, people were filled with doubt regarding my gender. Maybe I felt this ambiguity and maybe, besides sowing the seeds of a future identity crisis, it

helped brew in me the core values of resistance to injustice and discrimination.

However, despite and beyond any implicit or explicit personal objections, being born a female automatically implied that I was an upcoming **“woman”**.

Of course, being a girl came with its own set of desired characteristics: For pre-puberty those would be **“cuteness”** and **“mildness”**. I was destined to fail in both.

From early on I exhibited a strong preference for **“boys’ toys”** and luckily I was given many. I loved my cars and my Playmobil – especially the trucks and the horses. However, I was given even more dolls. There were a few I really liked – and by any mean aesthetic standard the ones I liked were the **“ugly”** ones. Barbie dolls, on the other hand, suffered in my hands slow deaths in cute dresses. I kept them in my closet, in a cupboard that looked like a little impromptu living room/bedroom/brothel. I chewed their hands and feet, cut their hair short and usually eventually decapitated them. I was declared **“violent”**.

Besides torturing dolls, I loved playing outside. I played hide and seek, tag, dodgeball, but most of all I played football with the boys, I fought with the boys, I went on adventures with the boys. In my mind I was one of them, whatever that meant. I was proclaimed a **“tomboy”**.

I was strong-willed, resolute, talkative and loud. On good days those characteristics would make me a **“leader”** but on bad days and since all I could actually lead was my shiny army of marbles, they just made me **“stubborn”**.

“You should become a lawyer”, classmates, teachers and family members would say. But I was mostly interested in dark worlds full of magic and all I wanted to become was either a diver or an astronaut.

“**Stubborn**” is most of the time a well-meant, even friendly, label, usually uttered by the people who have your best interest in mind. It is a pity that it’s almost always used when you refuse to comply to those good people’s wishes.

And since adjectives have their own clusters and spectrums, and despite its seeming innocence, “**stubborn**” often implied or came along with “**controversial**”, “**naysayer**” and “**quarrelsome**”.

Being characterized is inevitable, it happens all the time – and we do it all the time – and usually (and hopefully) the positive labels counterbalance or outweigh the negative ones.

But the waters are dangerous at the fuzzy borders of Meaning:

For me, “**stubborn**” is a compliment. It’s my strength of character. For me “**stubborn**” means “**assertive**” and that’s all I aspire to be (besides diver and/or astronaut).

But even “**assertive**”, the good side of “**stubborn**” – and especially when it comes from mouths connected to brains conditioned in regressive patriarchies with theocratic habits and one (and a half) foot in the East – often fails to sound positive.

And in such societies, being a “**tomboy**” has an expiration date.

Society tolerated me, a female child, when I acted as a boy, and it half-embraced my half-boyhood – until my body started changing visibly.

My whole world positioned then itself differently around me and it expected that I would do the same towards it. One against the World is a (very) high-risk bet.

I got my period when I was ten. I got my period at a time when menstruating for the first time was synonymous with (and explicitly phrased as) **“becoming a woman”**.

In a circle that I trusted, behaviors started changing, in tune with my changing body, but in an opposite direction. It felt like I was being punished as my body was starting to flourish: Suddenly I was being monitored, I wasn't allowed to visit the boys next door that I'd known since forever and only met during summer vacation, attention was paid to how I walked (**“like a boy”**) and talked (**“like a truck driver”**), I was urged to take ballet classes (to become **“graceful”** – it lasted a year and, needless to say, it was a disaster) and to stop swimming competitively (which I loved) because **“swimming will give you broad shoulders and this is not nice for a woman”**.

My changing body became a source of shame and a hindrance, instead of a source of pride and joy.

However, I was **“stubborn”**, and growing up I didn't change my ways.

With a fully developed body, and by the time I was twelve, discrimination took a darker turn. As girls grew, expectations

weren't limited anymore to them being **"cute"** and **"mild"** but extended to them being **"modest"**, **"prudent"** and **"quiet"**. Hanging out with the **"boys"**, and especially with the **"bad"** boys, was enough to signal a general alarm and to denote that I was **"wild"**. To top my confusion off, my other attribute, the positive one, being **"smart"**, wasn't considered **"cool"** anymore but **"nerdy"**.

Maybe you can ward labels off, when they come from the outside, from a **"society"** that you reject – particularly if you feel supported by a chosen by you few.

But stereotyping doesn't necessarily limit itself outside your inner circle. And when this circle, that you trusted and would have protected with your life, proves to be less progressive and open-minded than you would have hoped (because, let's say, the people who form it are neck-deep in the holy waters of patriarchal normativity, without even realizing it), and not only fails to protect you but adds to the damage, your world, your sense of self, may shake or even collapse.

Few opportunities are more fortunate than an identity crisis.

When you come to question – fundamentally question – your own identity, you dismantle everything: your beliefs, your upbringing, your education, the meaning of **"contemporary"** and the meaning of **"progressive"**. The meaning of friendship. The meaning of **"I love you"**. You question the meaning of truth. What is truth constituted of? What are you constituted of?

One needn't be a linguist or a philosopher to understand that abstract words are semantically dependent on conceptual and social factors.

In my effort to understand what it was that other people called me, I had to find the meaning of the words they used: I had to open them up, put them under the microscope, go back in time, grasp the sociopolitical context in which they were uttered, the personal histories of the people who uttered them, equally questioning their self-proclaimed progressiveness and my self-proclaimed right to be whoever I wanted to be and for as long as I wanted to be.

I had to go back to the root of it all, to the root of myself, to search if their claims were true, if I was who I thought I was or who the others thought I was, and who were they.

I had to go back a thousand times.

I had to bring down every single brick that I thought constituted me and try to hold it while it was turning into sand and running through my fingers, and make it solid again. I had to make a self with what I had. I had to clean, cleanse it of all the residue of other people's opinions, upbringing and cultural influence,

religious influence,

structural influence,

systemic

influence.

I had to create a framework, build a shell – defenses wherein I could safely position the parts of myself I held or would

hold dear in the future. I had to envision a future, in order to be able to exist fully. I had to understand, destroy and remake the history that made me, and make new history. I had to educate myself, make choices, say no, accept consequences, object to what felt wrong and unfair.

It took years but, in the ruins of the old, I built a new self. Luckily, I am stubborn.