

Seams

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Preface

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

–Jean-Paul Sartre

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 the "truth" constituted of? What are you constituted of?

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

In order to understand what it was that other people called me as I was growing up, I dissected the words they used and put them under the microscope: I grasped the sociopolitical context in which they were uttered, I researched the personal histories of the people who uttered them, I questioned their self-proclaimed progressiveness and my right to be whoever I wanted to be.

I had to go back a thousand times.

I brought down every little brick that constituted me and held it, before it ran like sand through my fingers. I had to make it solid again; to make a new self with what I had. Was a self without external influence even an option? Could I remove the

residue

of other people's opinions,

of my own

upbringing and cultural influences,

religious influences,

structural influences,

systemic

influences?

I employed new words to build a shell where I could safekeep the parts of myself I valued. To exist fully, I had to envision a future. To make that future I had to destroy and remake the history that made me. I had to educate myself, make choices, accept consequences, object to what felt wrong.

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

Chapter I

I was born a female.

At a time when ultrasound wasn't accurate enough to determine a fetus's sex, gender was predicted by heart rate. As stated in the family lore, the oracle-obstetrician prophesied that I was either going to be a dumb boy or a smart girl.

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

But even when my sex was officially assigned and I was dressed as a "proper" baby girl with the pink and the skirts and the flowers (as lore decrees), people would still mistake me for a boy: A story that my mother repeated so often that it left a lasting impression on me.



My mother – an avid wearer of itchy wool sweaters and chocking turtle-necks – disliked tutu skirts, ribbons and polka dots, so I skipped those. Maybe these were the undebatable feminine marks that people missed.

In any case, from before I was born and for quite some time after I saw my first February sun, people had doubts about my gender. Maybe this ambiguity of constructed polarities sowed the seeds of a future identity crisis, but also fermented the deep desire to resist injustice.

Despite any personal objections, being born a female automatically implied that I was an upcoming “woman”.

Of course, a girl at the beginning of the 1980s (at least in Athens, Greece) carried a set of desired characteristics: For pre-puberty those would be “cuteness” and “mildness”.

Some elements are unique to the Greek context: Greece invented democracy (excluding women and slaves); established Christianity (eradicating goddesses), and the labyrinthine Byzantine Empire (celebrating client politics); underwent Ottoman rule (for further suppression). After more than 400 years it emerged as a new territory composed of mostly Balkan ethnic groups sharing a common language and religion, and after WWII suffered a civil war and a dictatorship. In Greece, where Church and State are bound together to this day and whose official name is Hellas (as “Greece” is connected to a lowly past), in the 1980’s every house and school had icons on prominent display. In this context, “cuteness” and “mildness” had a serious ethical dimension, and the lack of decorum explicitly pointed to “sin”, of which women were anyway considered guilty.

I was bound to fail in both “cuteness” and “mildness”, to the point that my great-grandmother, an independent and fierce woman, told my mother when I was four that she should lock me up in reform school: I was “naughty”. This was the other side of the “smart” coin, potentially providing enough fuel to set a little witch on fire.

While I was already on the failing side, my yet unsuspecting parents handed me the toys I enjoyed most. I loved my cars and

my remote-controlled Jeep; my marbles, my Lego and my Playmobil: the red truck and horses of every color, that I liked putting side by side. And then, my instruments: my first Yamaha keyboards; my metallophone with the bright red, yellow, green, purple and blue keys, and the sweet, piercing sound of the high notes.

Even though my toys of choice were enough to keep me busy for hours, I had even more dolls, gifted from relatives and family friends who came at dinners and knew me under the general description, "girl". Along with the dolls came questions: "How many children are you going to have when you grow up?", "Who are you going to marry?".

There were only a few dolls I really liked – and by any mean aesthetic standard those were the "ugly" ones.



My favorite doll

Was I the only one who could get lost in her shiny blue eyes, and spend hours combing her unruly hair with my fingers?

Barbie dolls, on the other hand, suffered slow deaths in cute dresses of glittery pink sequin and flowery white cotton in my hands. They had their best on, elegant peep-toes and permanent

make-up included. They were seated next to each other – with the occasional poor Ken or his Greek knock-off twin, John-John, like lost strangers with dubious intentions – in a makeshift, albeit dark, room in the bottom self of my closet. I had made it cozy with an old mattress from a large doll's pram and they stayed frozen there, with locked smiles, abducted by a girl who never felt empathy for them: It was a matter of time before I left visible teeth marks on their hands and feet and cut their hair short. The luckier ones escaped misery by decapitation.

Following the discovery of a mutilated doll's body, I often overheard concerned whispers in the corridor, confidential exchanges between my mother and grandparents regarding my "violent" tendencies.

When I wasn't creating worlds of adventure or sorrow, I played outside.

The days and the mud puddles in the tangle of empty lots seemed endless in a city that still, miraculously, had underdeveloped corners which attracted children with brakeless bikes and half-inflated balls like sewers attract rats.

The elation I felt "outside", the earthy stiffness of dirt that stayed with me as lived memory, saved my life later, when I was grasping at external positivity, to use it as soil and plant mental flowers "inside".

I can't forgive the class bias for making "dirty" such a negative word. There, in the dirt, I played hide and seek, tag, dodgeball, but most of all I played football with the

boys, I fought with the boys, I explored dilapidated buildings and climbed fig trees with the boys. In my mind I was one of them, whatever that was.

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".

The neighborhood kids I represented during disputes with elderly neighbors would say: "You should become a lawyer". The "mischievous" classmates I defended in front of the teacher and the family members I argued with agreed.

But I was mostly interested in dark worlds full of magic, losing myself in the midday high-summer heat in my uncle's back-up library in our seaside retreat: Greek philosophers, diving manuals, Indian poets, interior design luxury photobooks, Eastern mystics, National Geographic magazines, André Gide and Dostoyevsky, all devoured by the age of ten, words and images taking their shape, even when what lay between the lines remained obscure. I was reading endlessly, resting my gaze from time to time on the breezy wild-pistachio tree "outside". The tree obstructed the view to the sun-and-salt-burned fields next to our summer house, and all I wanted to become was a diver, or an astronaut.

"Stubborn" belongs to the "you should become a lawyer" category: most of the time it's a well-meant, even friendly, label, uttered by people with your best interest in mind. It's the same lot that urges you to become a lawyer, but from the

flip side: “stubborn” is used when you don’t comply to those good people’s wishes, for example when you refuse to wear skirt suits or dance at family parties.

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

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 aspired to be at that age (besides diver and astronaut).

But even “assertive”, the good side of “stubborn”, when assigned to a “girl” – especially from mouths conditioned in regressive patriarchies with theocratic habits, stuck between the East and the West – often fails to sound positive.

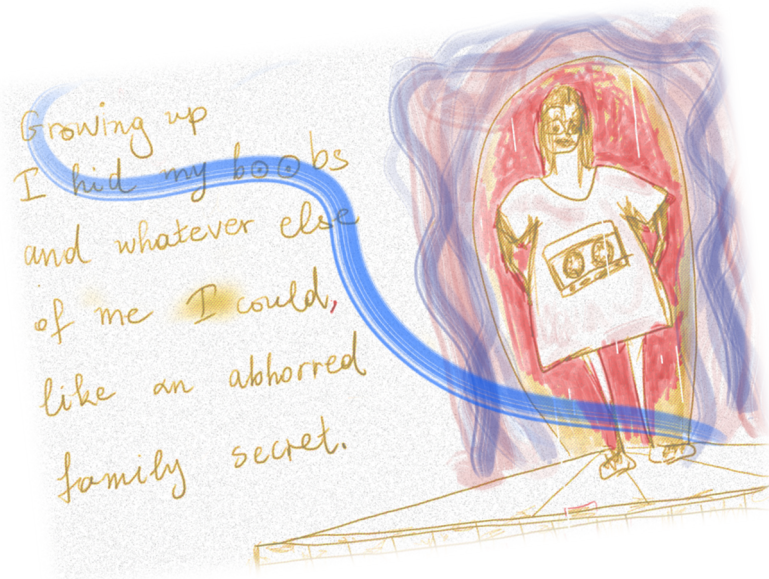
And in such societies, being a “stubborn tomboy” has an expiration date.

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

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

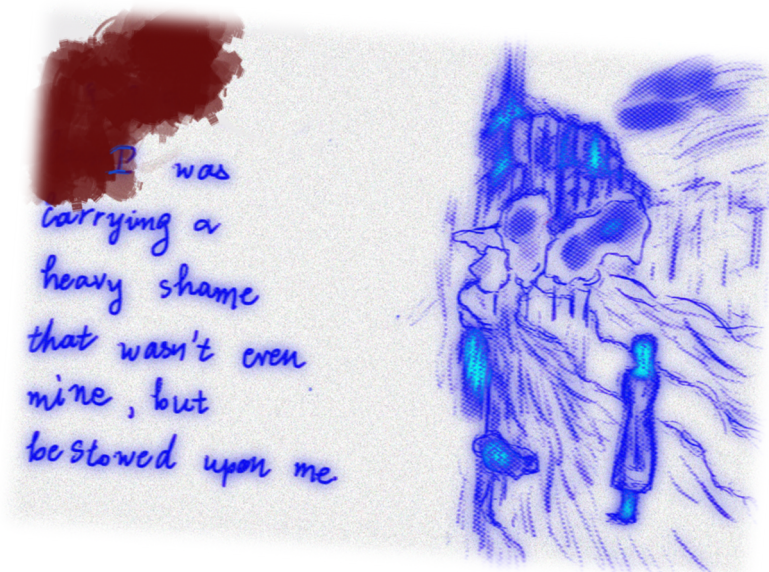
I got my first period when I was ten. At the time such an event was explicitly phrased as “becoming a woman”.

In circles that I trusted – my family, my school, my gymnastics team – behaviors started changing, in tune with my changing body, but in the opposite direction. It felt like I was being punished as my body started to flourish: Suddenly I was being laughed at because my breasts started filling up my leotards;



when I went to the summer house I wasn't allowed to visit the boys next door, the boys I'd eaten dirt and chased locusts with, to avoid potential dangers of a sexual nature; my mother – with her beauty treatments, her long nails and her fashion magazines – would correct me because I walked "like a boy" and talked "like a truck driver", and strongly urged me to take ballet classes in order to become "graceful". It lasted a year and it was a disaster: It made me feel less graceful than ever, not belonging, not achieving, not fitting in. I stopped swimming competitively (which I loved) because "swimming would give me 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.



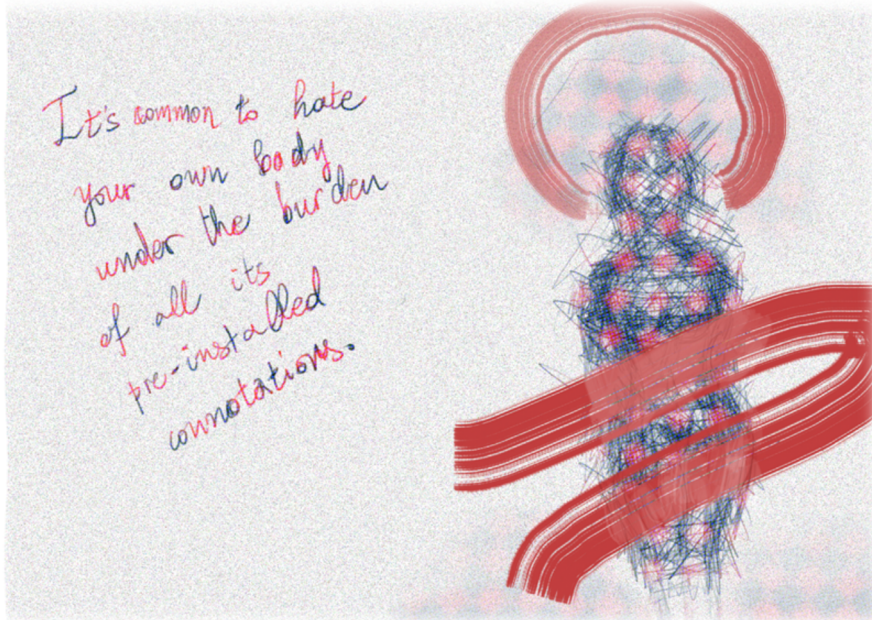
However, I was “stubborn”, and growing up I didn’t change my ways.

By the time I was twelve, with a fully developed body, the gap between me and what was expected of me had grown wider. As girls grew, expectations weren’t limited to being “cute” and “mild” but extended to being “modest”, “prudent” and “quiet”. Hanging out with the boys, and especially with the “bad” boys, was enough to set off a general alarm and to label me “wild”.

To top my confusion off, my other attribute, the positive one, being “smart”, wasn’t considered “cool” anymore but “nerdy”.

Even among the boys I stopped feeling welcome. Partiality came with their upbringing: Some wouldn’t even talk or direct their gaze towards me, and among my “friends” the discrimination I was subject to went unnoticed. For a while this behavior perplexed me but eventually I understood that for them too I was a “girl”.

When the false-consensus effect collapsed I felt abandoned by my family and my peers.



Many of the “progressive” and “open-minded” people who wore the badges of freedom and self-determination were still neck-deep in the holy waters of patriarchal normativity, without even realizing it.

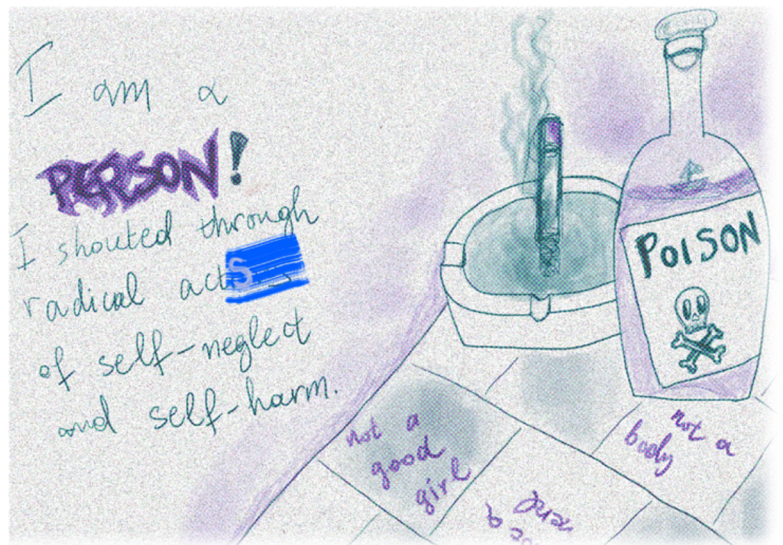
I was “different” and my inner circle not only failed to protect me but added to the damage by passively supporting the role of the “subordinate” that was assigned to me by default and I was reminded of every day, in all my interactions. Under such pressure, my world, my sense of self, collapsed.

Sometimes,
things comes down
to either getting
crushed by or
rising above
what others
make of you.



Few opportunities are more fortunate than an identity crisis, provided that you will survive it.

The defenses I built during my teenage years were first based on rejecting the world that was trying to box me – the “superficial”, “money-worshipping” suburban comfort – a rejection I expressed by not

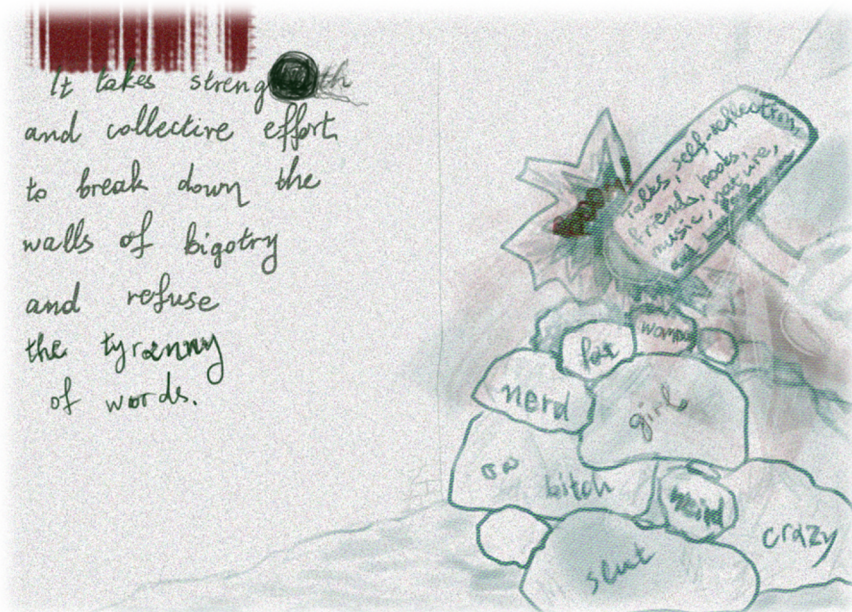


conforming to the desired standard of cuteness and mildness. My assertiveness now made me “tough” and “strong”, smoking and drinking at thirteen, very consciously denouncing god, cutting my hair very short, running away from home.

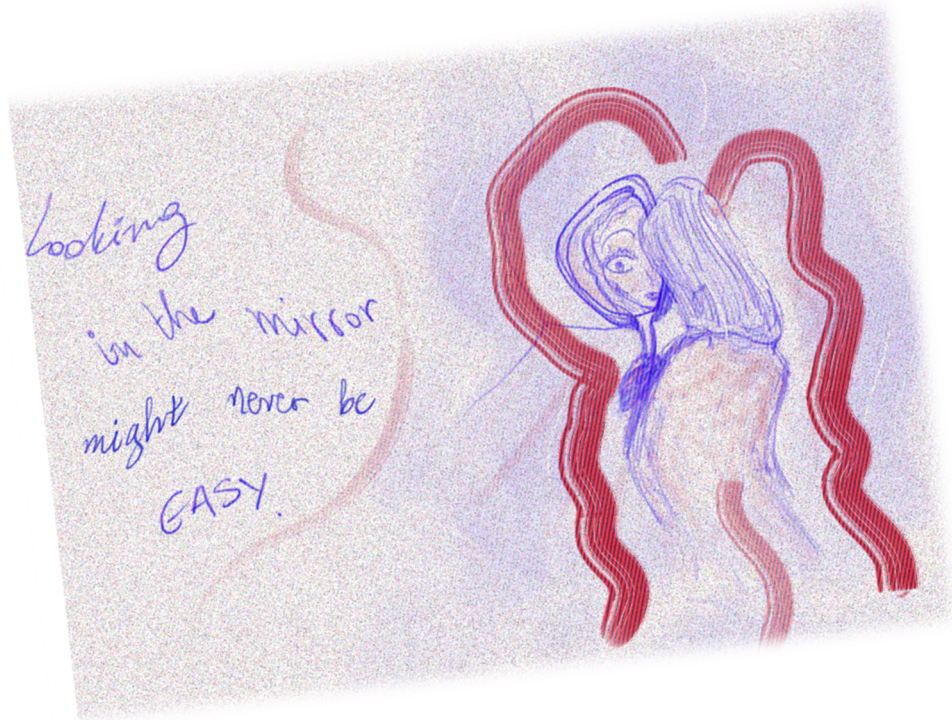
Still with the boys. Always with the boys.

At school I underperformed on purpose: Standing out would make me a collaborator of the system I wanted to fight, and a target for the groups I was trying to belong to. I only got away with my “extreme” and “unacceptable” behavior because, somehow, I still was a top student.

While I was morphing through a deep feeling of injustice into something “weird”, the resources I had access to became my building blocks: My close relationship with nature manifesting in long walks with my inner dialogue for company; the local CD-store; little escapades from the “boring” South to the great wonders of a dying underground scene in the center of the world – Athens – which offered a sense of community and belonging; my guitar; all art that made “strange” a good thing and filled me with comfort; the “misfits” who accepted me.



Although the “wholeness” of a core self is a construct,
although nothing in us remains unmovable



one needs the concept of “identity” as much as one needs a
roof over their head.

I had to make a new self, with new vocabulary:

A frame

“worthy”

a house

“beautiful”

a room

“warm”

where I could feel

“capable”

comfortable and safe

to exist

allowed to be and to become

“lovable”

and try and fail and try.

I made it through.

