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Gender Vertigo

ANDERS GOLDFARB

As a Lesbian Avenger in San Francisco

in the late nineties, I wore a lioness crew cut and crusaded against gender stereotypes. Still I believed fervently in femaleness; the word *woman* encompassed sisters, lovers, and self. Some nights I read Adrienne Rich's poetry out loud and longed for a partner about whom I could declare, "We were two lovers of one gender, / we were two women of one generation." When

I met Sarian, I thought she might be the one.

Sarian found her way to our Avengers group in the middle of her law-school finals. Fed up with stuffy Stanford University, she came to a Monday-night meeting in my cavernous living room. Social workers, Starbucks baristas, dot-com engineers, preschool teachers, and sex-toy saleswomen sprawled on the salvaged couch and vinyl chairs, a flock of dykes clad in pink

nail polish and torn fishnets, studded belts and fleece jackets. A few friends and I had revived this San Francisco chapter of the Avengers, and I sometimes still worried that a pack of Harley-riding butches would storm a meeting and challenge our presumption. I was a former good girl who had shed her long brown hair and habit of looking up to men only two years earlier.

Sarian came to my door in shorts, slouching but not shivering in the December night. She looked as slim and agile as a monkey and slightly aggressive with her bleached, spiky hair. I liked the name “Sarian” — it sounded slinky, sylvan, prehistoric. She followed me upstairs, where the Avengers were discussing their favorite superheroes and the things they wanted to change about San Francisco. I hoped Sarian wouldn’t be disappointed, as the wish list couldn’t have been described as practical. The mantra was “dyke space in the city,” but I didn’t see how we could acquire this unless an heiress donated a Victorian. Clad in black with a shaved head, my co-organizer, Sam, pounded the air with her fist and announced, “We’re here to fuck shit up!” Another Avenger looked forward to the naked-pudding-wrestling fundraiser. Finally someone came clean: a sweet-faced college kid said she just wanted a girlfriend. Nervous laughter ensued; almost all of us were single.

The original Lesbian Avengers, started in New York City in 1991 by writer and ACT UP veteran Sarah Schulman and five other women, did more than matchmake. After skinheads threw a Molotov cocktail into an Oregon house and killed a lesbian and a gay man, the Avengers publicly ate fire in protest, chanting, “The fire will not consume us. We take it and make it our own.” Schulman seeded Avengers chapters around the country and adopted the slogan “We recruit!” to provoke the Christian Right. The D.C. chapter set up a “lesbian lifestyle” table at a Family Research Council convention, and an earlier San Francisco chapter stormed the offices of Exodus International, a Christian group promoting “freedom from homosexuality.” The Avengers released bags of locusts at the front desk, whereupon the receptionist called 911 to report, “There are lesbians here with bugs!”

Our incarnation borrowed the Avengers’ bomb logo and mission statement, which called on queer women to fight for “issues vital to our survival and visibility.” Sam even taught us to eat fire off coat hangers, though I only closed my teeth around a microscopic shred of flaming cotton.

Sarian arrived just as the chapter hit upon a cause: a local church had set up a homeless shelter for queer youth, but some neighbors were attempting to shut it down. The Avengers had met with city supervisors and started a petition to save the shelter. To my delight, Sarian volunteered to canvass. A few nights later, as she and I taped up flyers, I learned that she had ditched a budding career as an academic to try her hand at activism. Here was a smart-cookie queer, just what I aspired to be. We accosted passersby with our spiel about gay youths kicked out by their parents, and Sarian walked right into a *taquería* to gather signatures. I was too shy to follow, but I watched as she bent to talk to an older man in a jean jacket. Sarian waited, grave as a butler, gangly arms at her sides, while he signed. She looked vulnerable yet determined in her baggy shorts. I was hooked.

Each time the Avengers planned an event, I’d wonder: Would

Sarian show up at the decorating party for “Dyke Day in the Castro”? Would Sarian join the stealth-stickering operation at Victoria’s Secret? Sarian would; Sarian did. As a way to build up my sexual courage, I figured I’d better ask her out. I left on her answering machine what I hoped was a sufficiently blasé invitation to do something together. Sarian called right back: sure, what did I want to do?

Sitting in a sushi dive known as “No Name,” because it had no sign, we talked as if starved for speech. The waitress had to return twice to get our order. It seemed Sarian and I had led parallel lives: She had a BA in math; in high school I’d planned to major in math. Each of us had embraced philosophy and then turned away because it wasn’t taught as if it mattered. We were both addicted to critical theory but tired of its self-referential obscurity. Sarian had spent the previous summer hiking the Sierras and the Santa Cruz Mountains — my favorite form of recreation. She was goofy and batted the air with her hands when excited; at family dinners I was wont to wear my spaghetti.

Stanford University was holding a formal dance that night, and Sarian half joked that we should drop by there in suits. I had always wanted to do drag, so we drove back to her studio and examined her collection of secondhand men’s clothes. I emerged from the bathroom in loose gray pants and a black jacket and eyed the Dickensian boy in the mirror. Dapper in a navy blue suit, Sarian ushered me out the door. The dimly lit hall at Stanford recalled my high-school homecoming, down to the cheddar potato chips and Safeway soda. The women wore poofy dresses with low-cut tops, and the men stood around, as expressionless as lampposts. Few people talked to us. I felt like a spy.

Even when not in drag, Sarian and I shared a similar androgynous style. I hoped that together we could puzzle out the mystery of gender, a topic that increasingly took center stage at Avengers meetings. Our group had its roots in lesbian feminism, which meant we hated rapists, fat phobia, and any threat to women’s sexuality and solidarity. The scene in San Francisco was changing, however. The era of the flannel-shirted “tea and cats” lesbians had ended, and butch and femme roles had made a comeback after decades of feminist disapproval. Academics raved about postmodern theorists like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, who questioned the foundations of gender. At the same time, female-to-male and male-to-female transsexuals were asking for recognition in gay and lesbian circles. The younger generation saw gender transgression as the common link among all these groups. “Queers” could help each other wriggle out of our Tarzan/Jane straitjackets.

By the time I moved to San Francisco after graduation, most queer organizations had added the *T* — for “transgender” — to their acronyms. Dykes and gay men danced at “Tranny-shack” on Tuesday nights and preached transgender rights in public high schools. Two male-to-female trans women joined the Avengers: punk, sexy Susanna, who smoothed pancake over her stubble; and anarchist Chris, who looked like a plump boy but wore tight, glittery shirts. I referred to them both as “she,” as did everyone else. The Avengers brought in a consultant to teach us “Trans 101 for Revolution” and petitioned the

local women's bathhouse to welcome trans women. Yet when somebody's male friend showed up at a meeting, we gently let him know it was a "woman-only space."

I didn't want to admit it, but inside my mind the biological binary still reigned. My father and my college buddies and my villainous ex-boyfriends were *men*, and I was a woman, as were most of my friends and all of my potential lovers. I thought of our group as a band of females with a couple of trans people thrown in for good measure. Once, I walked into a meeting just as Susanna lifted her shirt to display her new piercings. Her pink nipples jutted out of smooth, pale breasts, like a young girl's. I had never tried to imagine her chest or inquired about the effects of estrogen. Transgender bodies seemed as mythical to me as dragon flesh.

After our night of drag, Sarian and I

begin to date. Maybe. I couldn't tell. At the end of our evenings together she gave me long goodbye hugs, and her eyes darted all over me as she pulled away. During Avengers meetings I glanced at her sitting with her legs spread wide in tweed shorts. I allowed myself to imagine a kiss.

Sarian offered to teach me jujitsu, and one afternoon, during a lesson on a beach south of the city, I threw her down, pressed myself into her wiry frame, and pinned her hands while she wriggled. After a few more throws, we left off the instruction and began to bury our legs in the sand and unearth them. Then we thumb-wrestled. Our fingers wandered, gritty with sand, tracing the lines on each other's palms.

A week later I acted. Sarian came to my place for tea, and as we perused my books, my arm snuck around her shoulder. Our lips met, and we tumbled onto the futon, where something verging on sex took place.

Afterward I said, "You can stay if you like."

"That's sweet." She stared at me with those owl eyes. "I think I'd better get going."

Two days passed without word from Sarian. I sobbed. I wrote poetry. On the third day, she e-mailed:

hey Anna —
do you want to talk sometime? i guess this might be hard timing-wise — maybe i could come meet you somewhere during your lunch on Fri? what do you think???

— Sarian

Sarian showed up at the waterfall in Yerba Buena Gardens twenty minutes late and declared, without preamble, "I was hoping we could just be friends. I don't know why, but it doesn't feel right." Later she apologized and explained, "I was flirting with you, but when I flirt, I don't yet know if I want to go further."

For the next few months I rehashed the postmortem with my mother, my aunt, my straight college friends — anyone who'd listen. Sarian had seemed my best chance at a sister soul mate. Technically we remained friends, but over the summer she rarely attended our dwindling Avengers meetings. Someone

mentioned that Sarian — who had changed her name once already when she'd invented "Sarian" — was changing her name again, to Daniel. Maybe she was constitutionally fickle. Then she e-mailed:

hey Anna —
do you want to meet sometime and do something?
— Sarian (changed my name though) ;)

A day later she sent this:

hey —
i wanted to tell you something — but not over e-mail
— so if you have time sometime that would be cool. if not, i'll attempt an e-mail version.
take care :)

I wondered if she had a deeper apology to deliver. It was even possible she had reconsidered. I remarked to my gossip-queen office-mate, "Sarian's changing her name to Daniel, and she wants to tell me something in person."

"I bet she wants to be a man!"

I scoffed. Sarian didn't even consider herself butch. I'd read her term paper on transgender law and knew her reservations about sex changes. I thought of her lying topless on my bed: the apricot tint of her skin; her pretty breasts.

On a sunny afternoon in Dolores Park,

I looked out over the bay and waited for Sarian. Gay guys in Speedos oiled themselves. A Latino man pushed an ice-cream cart up the hill. A few cotton-puff clouds hovered above the old mission and the palm trees. Up rode Sarian in a neon orange snow jacket, the kind I had worn as a kid. She hopped off her bike and hugged me.

"So you decided to change your name?" I said. I already missed the melody of "Sarian."

"Uh-huh."

I picked at the grass and forced myself to ask, "Why did you choose a male name?"

She breathed out, almost a whistle. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

I played the role of supportive friend, but my eyes kept returning to the lawn. Sarian/Daniel had realized over the last month or so that she wanted to "transition." She was happy; she had no doubts. She had scheduled a meeting with a therapist. Four sessions would certify her to receive hormones, and then — she clapped her hands — she would get "top surgery," maybe even fold it into her student loans. She had started going to a support group and had a crush on another "trannyboy."

This last part made me freeze. "So, will you be gay now?" I asked. "I mean, will you be a gay man?"

Sarian/Daniel squinted. Her voice got quiet, as if she were explaining a simple but adult truth: "I guess I'll just be queer."

(end of excerpt)