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# Beating the Red Stick

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BEATING THE RED STICK

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University  
and Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of English

by

Tracey Duncan

B.A., Columbia University, 2006

May 2011

*Where your life leads you, you must go.*

Oscar Wilde

*Roller derby really can save your life. Honest.*

Sharon “Villainelle” Tohline

## Preface

I never meant to become a derby girl. I wasn't interested in their punk rock, DIY aesthetic, their retro roller skates, or even the prospect of becoming a badass athlete. As a teenager I had rebelled by wearing ripped tights and dying my hair, but I didn't think I needed it as an adult. I didn't know how to roller skate, and I wasn't interested in learning. I worked out and taught yoga part-time, so I didn't have to worry about being in shape. I was fine. When I started this project, I was very secure in my life and my lifestyle. Or so I thought.

When I began attending Red Stick Roller Derby skate practices in October of 2009, it was at the insistence of a friend, Sarah Perry (AKA Tricky La Rouge). Over brunch one Sunday, she asked me about the topic of my thesis project.

I waved my hands around vaguely. "It's about Baton Rouge...and um, the places that people go, or create for themselves when they don't feel like they fit into the dominant culture..."

"You should come to practice," she said.

Honestly, at the suggestion of Tricky's then-boyfriend Ari who I knew from grad school, I had already thought about trying to incorporate roller derby into my project. I had nailed down two of the places I wanted to write about: Hound Dogs, a gay bar down the street from my home and the Capitol Grocery's front porch hang out, but I wanted to write about something female-centric.

"But I don't want to skate," I said.

Tricky shrugged and said, "I think you should come."

"Well, I'm definitely interested in writing about y'all..."

She gave me a look that I didn't understand at the time, that I would now recognize as knowing. As in she knew something that I didn't.

So, I went to practice. No big deal. I couldn't skate and no one but Tricky talked to me, but I didn't care because I was a writer and it was just a project and I was there to observe. I already thought, secretly, that I was probably cooler than everyone else, so I didn't really care if they liked me or not. I was not, after all, a girl looking to join a subculture. I just wanted to write about one.

At my first skate, I met girls covered in tattoos and girls with long armpit hair and gruff butchy lesbians in baggy pants. They were perfect. These girls obviously did not fit in to the single-string-of-pearls femininity that I had observed (and participated in) since moving to the South. And yet there they were, at a shitty run-down roller rink crawling with teenagers, making a home for themselves. And it was, as I knew from talking to Tricky, a pretty comfortable home.

My own home in Baton Rouge was pretty comfortable, too. I had, not six months before, married the man of my dreams. Actually, it's pretty fair to say that I married the man of everyone's dreams. He was charming and handsome and smart and talented. And he loved me. And I got to

be myself (covered in tattoos) and still enjoy a respectable middle class image because of his indisputably high brow.

Together, we were a solid bohemian pair. He was an academic but secretly a poet, and I was a creative type with a secretly academic bent. We almost never fought. We both dressed well and had a great house with a great porch swing and quirky cool home furnishings. We had been together a decade and we were happy. We had to be, because everyone wanted to be just like us. So, since my life was basically perfect, I knew that I would be able to feel an authentic empathy for the rollergirls due to a lifetime of disenfranchisement and subcultural affiliation, but that it wouldn't affect my practically perfect life in any transformative way.

And then it did.

This is the story of how roller derby destroyed my marriage, made me a stronger woman, and gave me a lifetime's worth of epiphanies. But though it will seem so at times, it's not just about me. This work is the result of a year and a half of playing with and interviewing the fabulous women of the Red Stick Roller Derby. It's about them, and all the other women who've been knocked down playing roller derby and gotten right back up.

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## **Abstract**

My thesis explores the history of Roller Derby, its modern revival, and the way that it changes the lives of the women who play it. From October 2009 to March 2011, I conducted ethnographic research and interviews with the Red Stick Roller Derby in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. My perspective is that of an observer turned player, and the piece centers around my own story of personal transformation. This work is part cultural history, part ethnography, and part memoir, written from an explicitly feminist perspective.

## Chapter One: Roller Derby is for Lesbians: A Short History of the Sport

“Roller derby,” Elizabeth said, tucking a well-sprayed strand of hair back into her patrician pageboy, “is for lesbians.” She looked steadily at the bow she was tying, a thick corset of green grosgrain on a shiny ivory-wrapped box. Her matte coral lipstick frowned into the corners of her mouth.

I looked at my husband who looked at the ground, shrugging self-consciously. It was, like most conversations with my mother-in-law, a game set up for me to lose. Daniel’s passive silence made him an unlikely ally, and my learned lack of combativeness prevented me from talking back. I cocked an eyebrow and stared at the two Nelsons. Elizabeth, one, Tracey, zero, and it was only ten in the morning.

“Here,” she said, handing me the package, “put this under the tree.”

Roller derby is for lesbians. Roller derby isn’t a *real* sport. Roller derby is a well-choreographed cat fight. The problem, for most civilians, is that they don’t actually know what roller derby is, but they have a collage of images compiled from the sport’s more than eighty-year history that doesn’t really make sense to them. Girls in the fifties elbowing each other in the face, flying over rails. Girls in fishnets and hotpants with pinup haircuts. Girls throwing creamed corn wrestling fundraisers. Girls. Girls. Girls.

All the usual stereotypes about women get pinned to girls who play roller derby. Women can’t get along in groups, so roller derby must be one giant brawl. Women don’t play real sports, and women who do are big, mannish dykes. And what’s up with the roller skates? How big is the ball? Do you *really* hurt each other, or is it staged? Do you guys just make up the rules as you go along, or what?

*Or what* is the answer. The other answers, in no particular order are *no*, *roller skates are fun*, and *there is no fucking ball*. If I sound defensive, it’s because I’m a *derby girl* now and am constantly asked to field long strings of pejorative questions, questions whose real and actual answers are often met with incredulity if not disbelief. Because roller derby remains a subcultural activity, most people don’t know anything about it except that it seems a little scary.

The beginnings of roller derby are, actually, a little scary. While the name “roller derby” has been around since the 1880’s, the sport is generally considered to have been invented in the mid-1930’s by a man named Leo Seltzer, a former dance- and walk-a-thon promoter. Leo invented roller derby as an alternative, of sorts, to those less athletic competitions. The thing about these depression-era marathon performances was that, while they are often depicted as kitschy, fun spectacles, they arose out of real need on the part of the competitors.

The truth is that dance-a-thon-ers weren’t competing for their love of dance. No one loves to dance without sleep for forty days straight. Hell, they weren’t even competing for the cash prizes, since those were completely fictitious. With long lines for food and very few jobs



available, Americans resorted to all sorts of drastic measures to make ends meet. Dance-a-thons were one of those drastic measures. Dancers were paid, not in money, but in food for the duration of the competition and a bed to crash in.

The incitement to “dance ‘til you drop” takes on insidious overtones when considered in this context. That is, in fact, exactly what the dancers did. The audience paid. Not just to see who won, but to see who collapsed. Many competitors suffered from exhaustion and fatigue, and sometimes organ failure. Still, they danced on, for days or weeks or months with no sleep, developing crowd-pleasing flips and spins as ways to rouse their drowsy partners. The spectacle of human misery was as enticing as the dance itself (Bay City Bombers 2010).

Although historical documents are rather vague on this point, it *seems* like Leo Seltzer wasn’t an exploitative cattle-prodder, like many marathon promoters were. He stopped organizing the competitions in 1933, when he felt they had become “vulgar.” But he had experienced a lot of success as a marathon producer and was itchy to find the next big thing. Seltzer told his friends over a greasy spoon dinner in Chicago that he had read that almost all Americans had roller skated at least once in their lives, and they challenged him to come up with a sport on skates.

The original roller derby, as developed by Leo Seltzer, was just a race. The first event was called the Transcontinental Roller Derby and was held at the Chicago Coliseum in 1935. Competitors of both sexes raced the banked track together, their goal to mark the distance from one side of the country to the other in successive laps. It sounds pretty boring compared to the high-octane sport that it’s become, but over twenty-thousand people came to see that first event, and it was immediately considered a success.

Soon, the coliseum-sized track shrunk to a more manageable size, and derby began to travel. Unfortunately, the country wasn’t really ready for roller derby, and the traveling sport was unable to match the crowds it garnered at its inaugural event. It wasn’t really until the late forties, when roller derby was first shown on television and couch potato consumers could watch derby from the safety of their own homes that the sport began to pick up speed. TV gave roller derby a national audience. Soon, it could be seen live three nights a week.

Eventually, the sport began to suffer from overexposure in the states. So, Seltzer, ever the entrepreneur, took his teams to Europe. They toured there from 1953 to 1954, and enjoyed a modicum of popularity. After his return to the U.S., Seltzer moved his roller derby headquarters to the west coast, where shortly thereafter, his son, Jerry Seltzer, took over day-to-day operations.

The sport itself had changed over time. Races were being organized into shorter “jams” or sprints. These jams turned into the most exciting parts of the game, and eventually rules were developed for the bumping and hitting that inevitably occurred when one skater or team attempted to get past the rest. Roller derby evolved into a contact sport. It was still co-ed, with women and men competing on the same team, but in (mostly) separately gendered jams.

Jerry Seltzer picked up roller derby where his father left off in 1959. He convinced a local TV station in San Francisco to air their Friday night games on Saturday mornings. Soon, roller derby

was being syndicated across the country. Under Jerry's guidance, the sport was picked up by 120 television stations across the country. It was still considered as much spectacle as it was sport, partially due to the inclusion of women. Women gave roller derby a wider audience, but they also prevented it from being seen as an intensely athletic competition (Wikipedia 2011).

By the mid-sixties, roller derby had become a popular sport. Important players like Ann Cavello and Joanie Weston became bonafide roller derby stars. Seltzer's league, the Bay City Bombers, grew so large it broke off into separate teams. The league flourished for a while, but when Jerry Seltzer sold the business in 1973, the new owners had trouble managing it. The second wave of roller derby was basically over.

Roller derby wasn't heard from again until 1989, when a nationally syndicated TV show, Rock-n-Roller Games, attempted to rekindle the sport's popularity. The show's approach was heavy on the sparkle and pretty low on authentic competition. It featured derby skaters on the traditional banked track, but with the additional spectacle of an alligator pit and live rock show. The program enjoyed extremely limited success and was canceled after a single season.

Ten years later, 1999, the TNN show RollerJams aired and brought derby to the airwaves for a new generation. Gone were the traditional quad roller skates of days passed, having been replaced by faddish inline skates. The show was highly choreographed and showcased skaters in glittery costumes and thick make up bashing into each other. As the last precursor to what is considered modern roller derby, this is what most civilians think of when they think of the sport. It was skates, hairspray, and violence. And then it just disappeared.

In 2001, a Tulsa native by the name of Dan Policarpo, AKA Devil Dan, moved to Austin, TX, with the fabulous idea of revitalizing this dead and then desecrated sport. He told Austin 360 that he "wanted to take a pop culture institution from the past and reload it with new information." At a casino meeting of about fifty prospective skaters, Dan preached the roller derby gospel. And the congregation was hooked.

Fortunately, Dan was something of a flake and didn't stick around the sport for long. Unfortunately, when he took off, he left with the \$1,500 that the new players had invested in the team. By the Austin league's inaugural bout in June of 2002, it was being run by a band of de-facto owner/skaters Dan had brought together that called themselves the She-E-Os. The company was called Bad Girl/Good Woman Productions. The team played an intraleague bout to their first real crowd (of 400) in August of 2002 as part of Austin's famed indie musical festival SXSW (South by Southwest).

The new roller derby was run by women, for women. Supposedly. The She-E-Os, as the heads of the company, promised the players uniforms and gear in return for their commitment. But as time went on, skaters watched their dues disappear and the She-E-Os didn't deliver. The She-E-Os, despite their outwardly DIY ethos, were actually in the *business* of roller derby, and many skaters felt exploited. At a meeting in April of 2003, 65 skaters walked away from Bad Girl/Good Woman to form a less hierarchical league, the Texas Rollergirls. Both leagues are successful today, and both are now skater-run, but they maintain a bitter rivalry, which was documented in the indie film, "Hell on Wheels" (Bob 2007).

Since 2002, the sport has evolved in many different directions. It is now primarily played on a flat track, although there are several banked track teams in Texas (started by Bad Girl/Good Woman) and on the West Coast. There is a central governing body of flat track derby called the Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA, pronounced woof-ta-da) that determines rules for the 160 plus affiliated leagues around the country. Leagues have formed in almost all fifty states and in other countries around the globe.

Contemporary popular culture played a large role in spreading news of the roller derby phenomenon. A&E's 2006 reality show, "Rollergirls" showcased the 2005 season of the five teams of the Texas Lonestar Rollergirls. It was through this medium that many would-be skaters got their first glimpse of modern roller derby. The dramatic personal lives and fierce competition amongst the skaters highlighted the more glamorous aspects of the sport, while still showcasing the athletic intensity. The show was canceled after only one season, but it reverberated inside the minds of women around the country who were looking for something new.

Most derby girls will tell you that the mainstream didn't really catch on to the sport until Drew Barrymore's coming-of-age film, "Whip It!" hit theatres in 2009. The movie featured indie sweetheart, Ellen Page, as Bliss Cavender, an angsty and intelligent teen looking to break out of the restrictive boundaries of her small town existence. Bliss, AKA Babe Ruthless, became the poster child for a new era of roller derby enthusiasts as a sensitive, yet wise-cracking badass skater.

After the release of the film, leagues around the country saw their recruits triple. New leagues sprouted up everywhere. Roller girls called this "The Whip It Effect" and a new wave of roller derby popularity ensued. There are currently 786 amateur roller derby leagues in operation, and roller derby is now considered the fastest growing sport in the world (Derby Roster 2011).

I came into derby around the same time the Whip It Effect was spreading across the country. I was already skating when I saw it, but I was still relatively new. Watching the movie on my couch with girls from the team, rolling joints and drinking beer after a long night of practice, we laughed at the movie's adolescent idealism.

"I love how she just becomes this kind of person who can totally blow off her first love."

"Yeah, it's ridiculous. Like being a derby girl made her into a totally different person..."

"It is cool, though, how she kisses him and then slaps him in the face. I like that part."

## Chapter Two: How Getting Derby in the South Made Me a Feminist

*In her hips, there's the revolution...in her kiss, I taste the revolution...*

-Bikini Kill, "Rebel Girl"

As a Virginian with white trash roots who attended college at Columbia in New York City, I had always considered myself a Southerner. Truthfully, my formative origins are a little more complicated than that. My childhood and adolescence was spent traveling between Northern Virginia, near Washington, and the Shenandoah Valley. My mother's family lived in rural West Virginia, where I spent many summers as a child, but didn't visit often as an adult. At nineteen, I moved to Miami where I neglected to attend college and elected to party instead. Six years later, at 25, I moved to New York City. At 30, I moved to Baton Rouge, where I hoped to cultivate some sort bohemian Southern-fried gentility that I thought I had lost in New York.

Even if I am from Virginia, which is technically below the Mason-Dixon line, it isn't the South. Not the way Louisiana is the South, anyhow. No one in Virginia describes the Civil War as "the war of Northern aggression." And for the most part, from what I remember of Virginia, people of different races live together in relative harmony, and women are treated with basically the same respect as men, if somewhat modified. I should have known that living in Louisiana would be different. On my first day in Louisiana on my picturesque porch swing, a man plucking weeds in the next yard over struck up a conversation with me.

"Where you from, honey?" he asked, holding an umbrella over his head. I could see red patches on his skin where cancers had been removed.

"Virginia."

"Well, for God's sakes, don't tell anyone!" An unspoken word hovered in the humidity between us. *Yankee*.

The conversation continued, but my mind stayed fixated on the implications of his coincidental insinuation. I just thought it was a sweet regionalism, and that surely his twang and my own less pronounced drawl didn't actually equate to any real world differences. In New York, I had been a champion of the South. Mostly because there weren't any others, but also because I felt like equating the South with the racism and sexism that exist everywhere in this country was short-sighted and condescending.

Coming to Louisiana made me realize that my upbringing was more urbane than I previously understood. I was never told what girls should be like or that they should cater to men. I wasn't taught to pander to men's egos or to keep my mouth shut. No one ever told me that I should get married. I didn't conform to traditional notions of modesty or propriety. And I didn't need to, because even though people in the North sometimes reacted negatively to my assertive personality, I never considered it a gendered issue.

I hadn't really considered myself a feminist since high school. Back then I aligned myself with goth and punk subcultures and the Riot Grrl ethos of the early 90's. Later, feminism came to seem old-fashioned to me, like some kind of quaint but irrelevant ideology from times past. Feminists in the university struck me as mostly ridiculous. It just didn't seem reasonable to me that the equipment I was carrying made that much of a difference to anyone, or that I needed to walk around looking at the world through a gynocentric lens.

Things changed for me when I moved to the South. The ironic pearls I had started wearing when I moved to Baton Rouge became an essential part of my daily uniform. The men I met wanted to date girls ten years younger than them who wore pastels and planned menus, and a lot of the women I was getting to know really wanted to get married and have babies, things that had only glancingly occurred to me. Doors were opened for me, and packages were carried. Men talked down to me.

When I started graduate school at LSU, I became the TA for a well-known professor, a writer and local hero of sorts. I loved that he had all the students over to his home for dinner. I loved his white Garden District house with its wrap-around porch. I loved the romantic Deep South specificity of the whole situation. As I left and thanked him for the meal, he asked, "Won't you stay for dessert?"

"No," I said wryly, "I'm watching my girlish figure."

"You do realize," he said, winking in a lascivious manner that only white-haired Southern men over the age of sixty-five can muster, "that you just offered me an invitation to look at your girlish figure."

I stammered some half-polite reply and left; but in reality, I was shocked. It wasn't like I had never been hit on inappropriately before, but the combination of his status as my boss and the insinuation that I had actually invited his advance was just too much for me. When I told other women in my program about the incident they grimaced, but shrugged. Something in their reactions told me that this was the new normal.

I want to say that I immediately resisted all of the new norms that were being thrown at me. I want to say that my confrontations with misogyny immediately led to a feminist awakening. And they did, but only a little tiny bit. I resisted the status quo outwardly by becoming more outspoken and in-your-face about my refusal to toe the gendered line, but I also secretly internalized the Southern ideals of femininity. I suddenly wanted to get married very badly. When I did get married, in the spring of 2009, I started baking and gardening and told my husband that I felt like one day I would like to work less so that I could make sure we had a nice home. Actually, it was more of a semi-psychotic ultimatum.

Me, in a red and white polka dotted apron, of all things: "I don't see why I have to work so much when all I want to do is bake bread and take care of our home."

Daniel, not looking up from the computer: "Tracey, are you trying to tell me that you want to be a *housewife*?"

Of course I was. And of course I denied it. Because what nastier word could there be to a modern woman, an intellectual and a perhaps re-budding feminist, than *housewife*?

This phase of mine didn't last long. Only a summer, really. School started again, and I remembered that I liked to get drunk and write poetry and that I wanted to have an enlightened marriage in which each partner was super independent. And my life was so safe and secure and cozy that it was fine for me to be a little unpredictable and off-kilter. Both my husband and I would attribute that to my artistic temperament and knew that when I needed to I would just get a regular career (like him) so that we could be the beautiful bourgeois bohemians that we were always meant to be. I could be a little ballsy, but I was going to do it in a well-tailored retro dress and heels.

I was so busy trying to be my intellectualized, alternative version of the perfect woman that I didn't notice I was starting to feel extremely hemmed in by the constraints of conventional norms. I knew I was frustrated at my failed attempts to fit in with my husband's family, but they were of a higher class than me, economically and socially, so I just attributed my unease to my less-than-conventional upbringing. I did all the things I was expected to do. I was a faithful wife and a good student. I worked hard. I wanted to be the mythical every woman, outspoken and confident and creative, but still *pretty*, you know.

And then there was roller derby.

When I first started showing up at Red Stick Roller Derby practices, I drew a very careful line between myself and the other women. *These women* needed an outlet for their aggression. *These women* needed a place to develop alter-egos to fill voids created by unfulfilling social and personal lives. *I* did not need these things. *I* was enlightened. *My* life was ideal. I only wanted to know about them because of my continuing interest in subcultures, despite the fact that I had already fallen into the mainstream.

But the women weren't who I thought they were, and neither, as it turns out, was I.

At first, derby integrated neatly into my well laid out domestic life. Instead of hitting the bar after practice, I brought girls over to my house and let my husband charm them. We drank copious amounts of bourbon, smoked pot, and got to know each other. Tricky, my neighbor and derby mentor, became a daily fixture in my home. We studied together, we skated together, and we partied together. We became confidants. None of this seemed out of keeping with the well-worn roles that my husband and I played in our relationship.

And then, one night, high on expensive vodka and cheap TV, as Tricky and I leaned out of our parting hug, we kissed. It was a small, unexpected moment. My body responded immediately. I pressed myself against her, and the four points of contact, hips and tits, not being enough, I nudged my knee between her thighs. She pulled back, and said, "I have to go."

"Okay?" I was drunk and confused.

“Your husband is upstairs.”

I didn't mean to, but I shrugged.

In that unconscious shrug was the evidence of a disconnection. A blip in the system. A wall was being built between myself and my husband. It was a wall that I knew well, but hadn't remembered for a long time. One that I had built in high school. A wall that separated my relationships with women from my relationships with men.

After I told him about the kiss, my husband was no longer so sure that this roller derby thing, and the women that went with it, were such a good idea. And I didn't care. Or rather, I cared, but in a somewhat less abstract way than I had begun to care about the fulfillment of my actual sexual and emotional needs. I became unsure about having a relationship that foreclosed upon the possibility of me having intimate relationships with women.

What I didn't tell Daniel about was the lingering excitement that that one small moment with Tricky had produced in me. I didn't really want to start anything up with her, because we were friends and it would have been complicated, but I did enjoy the subtle flirtation of our exchanges. The morning after the kiss, we glossed over it by text.

“Um, the events of last night are a little hazy to me. I woke up and found all my clothes on my living room floor. Should I be sending you flowers?” I asked.

“Ha, no. We just kissed, I think.”

We both knew what had happened, and I was sure that I had probably just drunkenly disrobed in my living room alone, but our lighthearted conversation enforced the fact that it was no big deal and that neither of us were interested in it happening again. And it never did, but regardless, that first last kiss with Tricky validated for me that I was a sexual being. Again.

The real truth behind my perfect life was that my husband hadn't fucked me since my wedding night. The other real truth was that I didn't mind that much. I loved him, and he loved me, but our relationship was, in the most conventional terms, quite chaste. And anyone who has taken more than a first glance at my sometimes aggressively flirtatious swagger would probably tell you that I am not quite chaste.

Months later, when I asked Tricky why she had left that night in such a hurry, she said, “You put your knee between my thighs and I knew that it was going to go from us making out in your living room to us fucking on your couch in three minutes or less.”

As a teenager, I had been what most people call “experimental” with my sexuality, meaning that I had considered myself bisexual and had had both male and female sexual partners. This was the sexualized component of my adolescent feminism. It was really important to me to have those intensely physical relationships with other girls, and I never felt bad or shameful about it. I never felt like I needed to confess it to anyone, either. My boyfriends never knew I fooled around with girls on the side, and I never thought it was important enough to tell my family about.

Throughout my early twenties in Miami, I maintained outwardly conventional relationships with men in which it was understood that I would also have sexual relationships with women. I always had a boyfriend. Always. And I almost always had a girl on the side. And I always said that I couldn't really get along with women, so I didn't want to date them, I just wanted to have sex with them. But there was, for me, something really important to me about that sex. It was *mine*. It was something I did just for me, not to be pleasing, not to be sexy for boys, but simply to experience pleasure.

And then, in 1999, I met Daniel in Miami, the sensitive intellectual with the chisled jaw. He looked so much like Prince Charming that I actually called him "Prince Charming". He was perfect. He was smart and talented and accepting. But it was clear from the get-go that, while he was willing to accept the fluidity of my sexuality in theory, in practice our relationship was going to be traditionally heterosexual and monogamous. In other words, no more girlfriends.

My sexual relationship with Daniel was complicated from the beginning. Having had some unsatisfying physical relationships in the past, he was awkward and uncomfortable with sex. We didn't actually sleep together for the first six months of our relationship, and when we did, I played the role of aggressor and seducer. It was a role that I was terrifyingly comfortable with.

As a child of divorce, I was one of those kids who flip-flopped endlessly between homes and parents. My father was a dedicated and sensitive, if unconventional, parent. He taught me to ski and encouraged my intellectual pursuits. And he always seemed to have an endless string of women trailing behind him. My mother was something of a fire cracker. She was whip smart and equally sexy. Men did things for her, not only because she was fun and kind, but because she had the kind of voluptuous figure and barely below the surface sexual charisma that most men find irresistible.

Watching my parent's love lives unfold around me since infancy, I had become comfortable with the idea of casual dating and open sexuality as normal. I remember coming in to my mother's bedroom once when I was about ten. A man, Tony, with sandy blonde hair and a slim build was dressing. I stopped in the doorway, and he looked at me with something like curiosity.

"Your mother is a very beautiful woman, you know." He said.

"Yes," I said. "I know."

He kissed her sleeping cheek and patted my head as he left. The gently curved arch of my mother's thigh peeked at me from between her satin sheets. She *was* beautiful. And she was powerful. And even though part of me hated the men who loved my mother, I guess I wanted to be just like her.

Although I might not have left my Yankee upbringing with backwards notions about what women were capable of professionally or how they should be treated generally, I did have some extremely ingrained ideas about what role I was supposed to play in male sexuality. I was



supposed to be fuckable. I was supposed to seduce. I was supposed to provide pleasure and put on a good show of receiving it. It may not be much of an art form, but I was really good at it.

I think Daniel was extremely taken with my sexual openness. I don't think that he had ever had an orgasm in the same room with another person before we slept together. But the excitement of our sexual relationship petered out quickly, and within two years, we were barely having sex at all. While the role of seducer of men was an easy one for me to slip into, I found it quite boring after a while. And Daniel, as it turned out, wasn't that interested in sex. Or at least he wasn't interested in sex with me.

When I was in college and Daniel was absorbed in grad school, I became attracted to one of his colleagues, Padma. She was a striking Indian girl, tall and lithe, with mounds of long dark hair, flashing eyes, and a husky voice from years of smoking. She was straight, she said, but she liked to cuddle. Cuddling turned into fondling which turned into awkward lunches the next day. I didn't tell Daniel about it, although I think our chemistry was unavoidably clear to him.

As a gift for my 28<sup>th</sup> birthday, Padma took me to the O-Bar in the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in Manhattan's Columbus Circle. I dressed carefully for the event in a tight striped dress and thigh-high stockings, the lacey tops of which, I knew, would peek out from the asymmetrical hem of my skirt as I walked. She picked me up in a taxi and told me I looked beautiful, and we held hands as we made our way through the bar. We drank expensive martinis and watched the horizon of the city change colors. As the martini glasses collected on the table next to us, our bodies got closer and closer. Late in the night, Padma pulled my hand up the silk charmusee of her dress and said, "Touch me."

I could feel her damp heat radiate towards me. I led her into the bathroom and fucked her on the floor. I pulled her hair as she straddled me, and allowed myself to be simultaneously seducer and seducee. It was semi-awkward, due to the very public location, the space constraints of the stall, and the throat clearing of the bathroom valet, but it was also intense and electrifying.

Having sex with Padma was, like the sex with girls I had had as a teenager, something I did for myself, just for the pure pleasure of it. Something that I wanted to hold outside of my relationships with men, outside of my relationship with Daniel. But I couldn't. It no longer felt like the liberating act of my adolescence. I don't know whether it was my love for Daniel that changed things or something more interior, but I was instantly remorseful. I kissed her a guilty goodnight, and in the growing light of dawn on my walk home, thought about how to tell Daniel.

I woke him up as soon as I walked through the door. "I had sex with Padma. I'm sorry. I don't know why. I was drunk and I thought that it was something you'd want me to do."

I wasn't lying when I said that. I had felt Daniel removing himself from me, physically and emotionally for months, and I thought that Padma taking on partial responsibility for my sexual appetite might come as a relief to him. He was busy with his work. He was preoccupied. I felt like he almost needed me to have another partner to take on some of the workload. I was kind of right.

Daniel was sad, but not in the way that I thought he might be. “I hope I didn’t make you feel like you had to do this,” he told me.

And then, for the first time in months, he fucked me. On the sink in our tiny efficiency bathroom. It was the last best sex that we ever had. That was in 2004, and we wouldn’t be married for five more years.

The eventually total sexlessness of my partnership with Daniel was a thing that I accepted, at least partially. Sometimes I would get angry and insist that we go to counseling, but he was never into it. Over the years, it started to seem normal. Daniel and I were close physically, always touching, always intimate, but never sexual. Even on our wedding day, the sex was perfunctory and quick. Neither of us was into it.

People ask me all the time, “Why did you marry a man that you weren’t having sex with?” The answer to that question has many moving parts. First of all, we had everything else going for us. Our relationship was more emotionally satisfying than any I had ever had. And, I thought, we understood each other on a fundamental level. We rooted for each other and tried to support each other’s goals, even when they conflicted with our own. We were best friends, and I didn’t want to be away from him for a single moment. And the truth was, even though I outwardly blamed him for our sexual difficulties, I secretly thought that our sex life was really my responsibility and that I was doing something wrong.

My Southern living-induced beskirted feminism began to change as I became more involved with roller derby. I was exposed to different kinds of relationships. I met women who confided in me about their relationships. Women whose husbands and boyfriends were as frigid as my own. Women who hated their husbands. Women who loved other women. Women who were gay, but had boyfriends on the side. Most importantly, I met women who seemed in control of their sexual lives in a way that I felt that I was not. Women who kissed me and made me remember a time in my life when I had sex for pleasure. Suddenly I was pissed.

One afternoon early into my derby career, I sat with my husband at our kitchen table. He was groggy from a nap and his dark wavy hair was mussed in an endearing way. I was angry but careful with my words.

“I think I feel really resentful about it being my job to seduce men and I don’t want to do it anymore. I need you to take responsibility for our sexual relationship.”

This may seem like a strangely intellectualized way to talk about your feelings, but it was typical of our domestic interactions. The actually weird thing about the conversation was that we didn’t even have a sexual relationship, only the unspoken agreement that we had had one before and would again someday.

Daniel looked at me with what I interpreted as sympathy. “I understand,” he said, “we’ll work on this.”

But we didn't work on it. He didn't, and neither did I. All my weird, pent up internalizations of Southern female culture got all kicked up. I didn't want to be the perfect pin-up girl with an on-the surface perfect marriage anymore, existing only in my own private fictional bohemia. I wanted to be the badass that I was as a teenager. I wanted control over my sexuality. For me, taking that control meant feminism. And it also meant forging a wall between myself and Daniel. A wall made of my own body.

### **Chapter Three: I'm Not Sorry: Roller Skating, Roller Derby, and Feminism**

*In derby we do more than just exist. When we are at our best we burn a hole in the world with our enthusiasm, with our passion. Boundaries exist only to be taken down. Apologies are a foreign language that serves only to temper-down the world. When I put on my skates I am made up of all the things I have ever apologized for: I'm in the way. I take up space. I knock things down. I get hurt. I hurt others. I stand up for myself. I fight for my friends. I am all rough edges and overabundance.*

-Sharon Tohline, AKA Villainelle

At first glance, roller derby might not seem like much of a feminist enterprise. The skaters, after all, are often scantily clad. Short skirts, hot pants, fishnet stockings, and lipstick are, often enough, as integral to the roller derby uniform as are the skates. And then there's the spectacle of the thing. For a lot of civilians, girls on rollerskates knocking each other over is basically the same as mud-wrestling. But roller skating in general, and derby in particular, has a long history of giving women a space in which to contest traditional notions of femininity.

During the Victorian era, there were few athletic activities available to women. Sports were considered not only masculine, but also inherently dangerous to women. Women were seen as weaker than men, as they generally still are, and since their primary role in society was to marry and mother, there was simply no need for women to become athletic. There were no housekeeping competitions, after all, or any breast feeding marathons. There was simply no social impetus for women to explore athleticism or develop competitive urges (Storms 2008).

When roller rinks began opening around the country in the 1880's, roller skating was not considered sport but leisure. Since roller skating was recreation there didn't seem to be any inherent social push to prevent women from participating in it, particularly wealthier women who had more leisure time than their lower class counterparts. It allowed young Victorian women a chance to get out of their homes and socialize in a co-ed environment. Of course, unmarried women didn't go anywhere without a chaperone, but the aunts and mothers of these young women were scarcely able to keep up with them on skates, so young women were permitted to experience what Sociologist Carolyn E. Storms calls, "the only type of unscripted communication with men that they would ever experience" (Storms 2008, 70). In other words, these women got to flirt away from the watchful eyes of their guardians for the very first time.

Roller skating, then, as you might have guessed, wasn't able to maintain its non-threatening status for very long. Especially after it was taken up as part of the reform efforts of the New Woman movement of the late nineteenth century, roller skating was seen by many as a threat to the social order and to the women themselves. The New Woman was active, social, and progressive. In other words, she was *not* the Victorian ideal. So you know that all those young female skaters who were enjoying their rink-found freedom and a new relationship to their bodies were bound to cause some problems, eventually.

Early in the 1880's, social conservatives and clergy came out against roller skating because it allowed women to comport themselves in an immoral fashion. Not only that, but it was being touted as a threat to women's health and morality. Doctors wrote in newspapers about the disastrous effects that skating could have on women's fertility. Methodist Episcopal preacher, Reverend John Parker, wrote in his 1885 article entitled, "Evil Effects of Roller Skating" that he "consider[ed] the practice a physiologically pernicious one. Its effects upon boys is bad enough but upon girls it is much worse. It destroys muscular balance; strains unduly the parts chiefly exercised...and prepares the way for a great deal of suffering and wretchedness" (Storms 2008, 72).

Long before roller skating as a recreational activity evolved into the sport we are talking about today, it was a feminist activity. On the most visceral level, it gave women something to do with their bodies and an opportunity to experience their own physicality. Socially, it freed women from some of the restrictions of tightly laced Victorian culture.

By the mid-twentieth century, backwards notions about roller skating's effects upon women's health and morality had largely disappeared. When roller derby came on the scene in the 30's, women were permitted to compete alongside men, and sometimes even against them. The female athletes, of course, were paid far less than their male counterparts, and their inclusion in the sport was seen as problematic for its widespread acceptance as a sport. Still, from the 1930's to the 1960's, it offered women a competitive athletic outlet with a widespread audience.

Not only that, but it gave women new kinds of role models that were athletic, competitive, and sometimes just plain ballsy. Prominent derby skaters like Joanie Weston and Ann Calvello embodied an alternative to the restrictive gender norms of the 50's and early 60's. Ann Calvello was known for her aggressive playing style and outrageous costuming, while Joanie Weston was known for her girl next door good looks and sweet demeanor. As teammates on the Bay City Bombers, Ann played the bad girl foil to Joanie's good girl persona.

Fans dubbed Joanie "The Blonde Bomber" and she quickly became the sweetheart of the roller derby world. She was fast and beautiful, a new kind of icon. Her combination of athleticism and femininity showed fans that women could be tough and attractive all at the same time. Ann, on the other hand, was a different kind of heroine. It might be more honest to call her an anti-heroine of sorts.

Ann Calvello did not have Joanie Weston's classic good looks. In fact, her fans called her "Bannana Nose". But Ann had something else that women needed to see: guts. Her showy, take-no-prisoners style of playing was inimitable, and her public persona is considered a pre-cursor to the punk rock style that derby maintains today. She wore mismatched gloves and spray painted her hair every color of the rainbow. When she met Mark "The Enforcer" D'Amato, the host on the set of Roller Jam, she kicked him in the balls, skates and all.

Ann told A.J. Epstein in an interview about the beginning of her derby career. "I just said, 'I'm gonna skate.' We all thought that it was going to last forever, and if it didn't...I didn't even think about getting married or anything. You know in those days, you've gotta be married by a certain age. I was just a great athlete" (Epstein 2010, 44).

The notion of a woman as a great athlete was a relatively new one. But even if women were competitive when they played, they were still expected to behave in a ladylike fashion off the track. But roller derby stars like Ann Calvillo trampled all over mainstream expectations, not just of what women were *supposed* to look like or be like, but also of what women were capable of. Women, as it turned out, were capable of achieving remarkable physical feats and also of living their lives with comfort outside of the ordinary constraints of polite society.

But it wasn't really until the most recent wave of roller derby popularity that roller derby came to be considered an explicitly feminist activity. When the sport was rekindled in the early aughts, it was no longer (for the most part) organized corporately. Women formed not-for-profit teams and leagues from the track up, with the dominant ethos being "by the skaters, for the skaters." Since it was also no longer a co-ed sport, it was also by women, for women. Academics love to compare roller derby teams to sororities or gangs because there is no language to describe the high level of female-centric, DIY-style collaboration that is seen in the sport.

Besides challenging the strictly hierarchical nature of sports organizations, modern roller derby also allows women a unique space in which to express themselves. While most teams have uniforms, players are usually permitted to customize them to meet their individual needs and desires. Women of all sizes wear tiny shorts and play up their sexuality. Other women wear low slung baggy shorts and boxers. Tattoos, piercings, and asymmetrical haircuts are all considered normal. The truth is, in roller derby, there is no normal.

The Rhinestone Cowgirls of Austin, for example, skate in denim Daisy Dukes with checkered gingham shirts tied above their navels. The Philly Rollergirls wear almost knee length black dress jerseys with a high-waisted blue belt. In Denver, skaters wear matching silver lame hot pants that show a lot of cheek. Some teams wear more traditional "sports" garb, with bicycle-length shorts and conservative cuts. Some teams have no uniform outside of a common tee shirt, and players choose the rest of their uniforms based on their own personal styles.

The cultivated lack of adhesion to mainstream feminine norms is a hallmark of modern roller derby. Sociologist Jennifer Carlson calls this kind of gender critique "the female signifiant". She uses this term to "indicate that in roller derby, norms surrounding femininity and athleticism are cited in ways that draw out tensions within these norms" (Carlson 2010, 429). In other words, derby skaters, through their various forms of aesthetic non-conformity, draw attention to the inherent constructedness of the very notion of femininity.

The hypersexualized attire of one player in combination with the aggressiveness of the sport allows women to embody seemingly contradictory ethos, while the undersexualized persona of another player immediately contradicts her. The result is a mish-mash of disconnected signifiers that leaves the players and audience breathlessly, but subconsciously, aware of the provisional nature of gender performance. Fans are simultaneously shocked and seduced, which permits some of their previously held notions about women, sports, and femininity, to be suspended.

Carlson likens this roller derby to punk rock, but in truth, women of all walks of life are drawn to the sport. Lawyers skate next to students who knock down housewives who are faster than

engineers. The diversity within roller derby teams is one of its most immediately attractive features for new players. When I began conducting my formal interviews, it was really hard to know where to begin. All the women have vastly different but equally compelling stories. And almost every player I talked to said something like, “Roller derby gave me something in common with women that I would never have met in any other setting.”

While the mainstream often views derby skaters as an easily categorized group of bad girls, the reality is quite different. In an interview, Ericka Seidemann, AKA Moxie Balboa, said, “Derby attracts a lot of intellectuals, don’t you think?” This is, in fact, pretty true, if education can in any way be conflated with intellectualism. In Jennifer Carlson’s study of the Sin City Rollergirls (Las Vegas, NV), she found that 58% of the players had a bachelor’s degree and that 26% had post-graduate degrees (Carlson 2010, 432).

Modern roller derby, then, is a sport that allows women to collaborate with other women in the organization of the team, gives them a forum in which to resist restrictive cultural norms, and forces them to compete athletically. It also opens up an intellectual space in which players are permitted to question their own previously held ideas about themselves and other women, one in which their questions are answered, or at least considered, by a multi-vocal chorus of strong, independent, and perhaps most importantly, *unapologetically loud* voices.

Derby practice resounds with the statement, “there is no sorry in roller derby”. Women who live prim and proper daily lives become badass athletes on the track. Their strategic skills become assets. The diversity of the players’s bodies and brains are equally important to gameplay, which gives these women the confidence to become more assertive in their lives both on and off the track. Derby skaters are taught that working hard, being vocal, getting hurt and hurting others are all just part of the game and part of life. And that there’s no need to apologize for any of it.

## Chapter Four: But I Don't Have Any Ball Lust or How I Got Addicted to Roller Derby

When I first heard of roller derby, like many people, I imagined it with a ball. So, when it was first suggested to me that I might want to *play* roller derby, I said, “but I don't have ball lust.”

This is what my husband had attributed my short-lived and totally failed relationship with racquetball to: a lack of ball lust. I didn't want the ball bad enough to chase it. I didn't care about winning. I had no competitive drive. I didn't mind getting dirty or sweaty or hurt, I just didn't care about sports or winning.

Ironically, for a while in my twenties, I had trained at a boxing gym. I loved it. It was full of sweat and dirt and layers of history that I didn't understand. And I loved hitting things. But honestly, all I ever hit was a bag. I went to group classes for non-boxers. We worked out hard and we sweated a lot, but it wasn't actually boxing in the sense that I never hit anyone and they never hit me. So, when I visited another boxing gym, I was shocked when the coach jabbed me lightly in the jaw.

I stopped moving. “You hit me in the face,” I said.

“It's boxing, honey. Sometimes you're gonna get hit in the face.” He looked at me squarely. “Now get mad.”

And I did. For a second. And for a few minutes I actually thought that I might turn into a good boxer. But I never went back. I'm not sure I was actually scared of getting hurt, but I definitely didn't have the fire it requires to compete.

And then, over the years, my point of view on competition changed. I moved with Daniel from Miami to New York so that he could attend graduate school at Columbia. Along with the new surroundings came a new group of friends, all his. I immediately found myself clashing with them, not just because they were *his* friends and were tempted to view me as something of an outsider, but because my life had been, in fact, very different from most of theirs. These differences were immediately apparent.

All Daniel's friends had been to college. Some of them already had master's degrees or even medical degrees. Most of them had been to prep school, and all of them seemed extremely comfortable with their elite status as students at a prestigious Ivy League University. They carried themselves with a certain bookish swagger tinged with a fair amount of social insecurity.

I, on the other hand, had been a high school drop-out. Instead of going to college, I left Virginia at eighteen for South Beach. I worked in night clubs and hob-nobbed with artists and semi-celebrities. I knew how to open a wine bottle with one hand and how to get free drugs from wealthy Euro-trash, but I had no idea what hegemony meant. In upper crust Manhattan, I was seriously out of my element.



Honestly, I didn't really like most of Daniel's friends at first. They were uninterested in my quirky creative pursuits, which sometimes involved drugs and coloring books, and they didn't know how to communicate with my lack of book learning. They seemed snotty to me, so sure of their places in the ruling class. But something in me found their elitism magnetic, and there was also the fact that my increasingly academic boyfriend was getting increasingly less easy to talk to without using jargon. I found myself wanting what those people seemed to have: big words and an easy way with them. So, in the fall of 2002, I applied to Columbia's School of General Studies, an undergraduate program for "non-traditional" students.

I actually cried during my entrance interview. The administrator assigned to discuss my qualifications with me was a stern black woman with a freckled chest. She seemed friendly at first, but soon the interview turned into an interrogation.

"I see you scored a 780 on the verbal portion of the SAT."

"Yes," I said. I must have been beaming. I was so proud of that score. It was almost perfect.

"But only a 430 on the math..." she looked down the bridge of her nose at me and pushed herself back into her chair haughtily.

"Um..."

"You do realize that if you are admitted to school here, you will have to know how to do *math*?"

My tears welled up instantly, and the conversation got even more combative. She asked me about some discrepancies on my transcript from community college with the insinuation that I had, perhaps, doctored the documents. I was more than sure in that moment that Columbia was not in my league.

But instead of receiving the thin rejection envelope I expected from Columbia, I received a congratulatory phone call. I was in. But, because I had been out of school so long, I was placed in a special study skills program to help me "catch up" with the rest of my classmates. As if such a thing were possible.

When I started school, my lack of academic experience was immediately obvious. Columbia was not a place where you could get away with being simply witty or pretty or naturally smart. You also had to have an extensive body of totally naturalized knowledge and strong writing skills. I had neither. I stammered half-coherent answers to questions asked of me in class and generally shied away from discussion. Papers came back to me with comments like, "I have no idea what you're trying to say!"

Honestly, it was terrifying. There I was, having made it into one of the best schools in the country, and I was totally choking. Pride and a very real awareness of how much it was costing me in student loans to stay in school, about \$40,000 a year, inspired me to get motivated. I went to a writing tutor twice a week. I read every assignment for every class. I visited all my

professors during their office hours, and explained to them apologetically that I really wanted to be a successful student.

By fits and starts, I caught up. I started taking classes with famous intellectuals. I found a home for myself in the Anthropology department and became the research assistant to one of Columbia's rockstar professors. One afternoon, I caught him grading papers over coffee in the basement of the Architecture building. I waited patiently as he shuffled to mine.

"What do you think?" I asked, nervous and agitated, even though I thought it was one of the best things I had ever written.

"Tracey," he said, "I think you will be an important intellectual someday."

There was no possibility of containing my enthusiasm for his response. I think I might have even hugged him. Or worse, I might have kissed him. He couldn't have meant what he said, of course, I must have misheard him, but it was enough to swell my pride in a major way.

Facing the now seemingly possible task of becoming successful at Columbia changed my whole demeanor. In class, I became aggressively voca. I argued tirelessly with Daniel's grad student friends and became more aware of their awkwardness. I got confident and cocky and supremely aware that my combination of street smarts and theoretical knowledge made me unique.

"Tracey," Daniel asked me once, "do you always have to remind everyone that you're smarter than them?"

Yes, actually, I did. Because even if I wasn't actually smarter, I really needed to feel on par with the people in my life, and in Daniel's. It wasn't ball lust, exactly, but it was something like it. The high brow environment of academic Upper West Side Manhattan made me want to be a different person. Not a person out of keeping with my own personal ideals, exactly, but one that could compete with people with more resources than I had. My newfound intellectualism didn't integrate easily into my life, at first. I really had something to prove. But once my confidence in my own ability to converse with the elite began to improve, so did my comfort in doing so.

For me, coming in to roller derby in Baton Rouge was a lot like going to Columbia. I might not have been looking to join a subculture of empowered women, but I was certainly looking to find evidence of one. And, like I had been at Columbia, I was very very behind. Until I went to my first Red Stick Roller Derby practice, I had skated maybe a handful of times in my whole life. Sure, like other teenagers, I had gotten my dad to drop me off at the roller rink on Sunday afternoons, but unlike other teenagers I walked out the back door of the rink to smoke pot, gossip, and make out with boys in the alley behind it. Consequently, I had never gained the naturalized skating skills that all the other girls seemed to have.

As a teen I had been totally checked out of school and had never played any sports. My father forced me to take ski trips from the time I was seven, but I remained a resolutely terrible skier until my late teens. As an adult, I began running, going to the gym, and practicing yoga, so when

I came into roller derby I wasn't totally out of shape, but I didn't know anything about working out with other people, or more importantly, working with them physically.

I pawed my way around the walls of the rink for weeks, not improving much and, frankly, not really caring. Derby was a writing project for me, so as long as I didn't kill myself doing it, I was just in it for the participant observer experience. But only a few weeks into practice, I found myself thrust into a real live scrimmage. Tricky pushed me into the pack and said, "Girl, go get you some."

It was a no-hitting scrimmage, but because I was so clumsy, the speed of the game and my proximity to the other skaters induced an instantaneous panic attack. As I skated as fast as I could to stay near the rest of the pack, a skinny blonde jammer with a long stride yelled behind me.

"Get outta my way, bitch!"

Yes, she really said that. But the problem was that I *couldn't* get out of her way, I just couldn't skate quickly or precisely enough. Her shoulder bumped into me as she flew past and as I fell down, my knee pads made a sickening thud on the rink floor. Winded and surprised, I struggled to stand and fell right back down. On the floor, all I could think was, "Get up. Get up. Get the fuck up!" When I finally did get myself upright, I skated off the track. I was obviously out of my league. But that first fall on the rink floor brought a crystallized moment of clarity in which all I could think about was that I was simply not the kind of person that stayed down.

This, I think, is the kind of physical/psychological epiphany that made so roller derby addictive to me. Every hit I took, every hard fall, was an opportunity to make a decision about what kind of person I was. I watched other girls at practice stay on the ground for long minutes, begging for ice or inhalers or attention when they fell, and I thought, "That's just not me." Roller derby gave me the opportunity to make an active choice to be resilient.

Tricky and Turbo, the friends who had brought me to practice, didn't say anything to me about my terrible performance on the track. Instead, Turbo said, "Way to get into the mix." Her quick smile told me that she was proud of me, even if I did fall a lot.

"Um, thanks, but I think I'm a major liability to the team."

They weren't hearing it. They told me stories about the hot blonde jammer who seemed like superwoman. Her name was Melanie Maurin, AKA Abita Hoedown, and according to them, she hadn't been able to skate when she showed up to practice either.

"She looked like a giraffe on wheels," they said, "and she was so clunky. Her skates made the most terrible noises. But now, she's our best jammer."

For months I remained the slowest, clumsiest skater at practice. I wasn't catching up. But no one, not even the senior skaters who barely spoke to me, ever asked me to leave or insinuated that I

was simply not cut out for derby. My inexperience and awkwardness was accepted and every minor triumph celebrated.

“Hey, you were a lot faster tonight.”

“Your plow stop is looking really strong.”

“You didn’t fall down when Brat blocked you!”

I had never been around a group of women who were so supportive of me. They really wanted me to succeed and to be part of the team. Something about their confidence in me struck a long-hidden cord. The spirit of camaraderie was infectious.

Of course, it wasn’t all accolades and compliments. Socially, I was making no in-roads. The girls I was already friends with on the team stayed friendly, but no one else noticed me, and when they did, it was with a solid dose of suspicion.

“What’s your name again?” was something I was asked often.

Despite the social hazing, I was exhilarated by derbydom. First of all, I had unwittingly found myself in a place where I didn’t have to be perfect. I could kind of suck, but as long as I didn’t give up, the women of Red Stick were going to stand by me. And since they weren’t going to give up on me, I started to feel a very real sense of obligation to be worth their investment in me. The observation aspect of writing about roller derby faded into the background, and I started to become completely immersed. I had to catch up.

Once I committed, my skating and skills improved, and as in college, I became obsessed with the possibility of my own success. I always knew that I would never be the best player on the team, I just wanted to be able to play.

Ever the academic, I “studied” derby all the time. I skated on the streets in front of my home and started doing a lot of squats. I scoured the internet for training tips, derby history, derby stories, whatever I could uncover. When I couldn’t find all the information I wanted in one place, I decided to create my own derby website, Live! Derby! Girls!

I stopped all my other unpaid writing projects and focused on developing the site. Girls on the team saw that even if I wasn’t a good player, I was obviously dedicated to the sport. Because roller derby teams are run by the skaters, there is an endless amount of work besides skating that the players have to do. I initiated sponsorships for uniforms, joined the training committee and began teaching yoga to the players during our off-skates practices. My life became derby, derby, and more derby.

By spring of 2010, the rest of my personal life began to disappear. My other, non-derby, friendships seemed less compelling to me. And my relationship with Daniel, which had been for years a singular source of comfort to me, began to feel itchy and restrictive. He wasn’t opposed to my involvement in derby, but he didn’t really want to be involved himself. If the girls came

over, fine, but he wasn't going to show up at their parties with me. So I planned solo cross country trips to roller derby bootcamps and roller derby conventions and shrugged off his lack of enthusiasm. I was hooked.

My shorts got shorter, and so did the time I spent at home. And while, at first, I tried to use my newfound physical confidence to seduce Daniel, he wasn't interested in being seduced by me, and he was somewhat dismayed by the skin I began to show. Slowly, I stopped caring. As skimpy as my clothing got, I didn't dress to please men anymore. I dressed for my team. I spurned every man that checked out my ass or commented on my fishnets. I sat on girls' laps and began batting my eyelashes for girls only. And I felt, for the first time in twenty years, in control and comfortable with the role I was playing as a woman.

I wasn't the only one, either. I met women who totally neglected their jobs and families to come to practice. At work, they printed up rules or drills or made attendance spreadsheets. At home, their children learned to sew RSRD patches onto hats like little Asian sweatshop kids. Girls had affairs with other players and made out openly at after parties. Girls wrote songs about the team and made RSRD art. Okay, I might have been exaggerating a little about the sweatshop kids, but the rest is totally true.

So, what was it about roller derby that we all found so engrossing? The truth is that I just I don't know. It had something to do with finding a rebellious teenage part of myself that I thought I had lost forever, and something to do with feeling like I was part of something, a revolution that was way way bigger than me. On a personal level, it allowed me to begin thinking about myself in new ways, as an athlete, and as a strong powerful woman who did not have to be defined by culturally constructed domestic guidelines, sexual or otherwise.

Little did I know that the strange tingle of empowerment I was feeling was just a tickle of what was left to come.

## **Chapter Five: Laissez Les Mechant Filles Rouler: The Founding of RSRD and its Structure**

*We are a professional team with plenty of attitude and skill, and always strive for fair play. But don't let that mislead you. We are a true grit, hardcore derby team with the passion and moxie that will leave any team with the lasting memory of the day they woman'ed up against the Baton Rouge Red Stick Roller Derby Team.*

-from the Red Stick Roller Derby Mission Statement

Red Stick Roller Derby was the brainchild of LSU student Mary Koehler, AKA Zarathrustya. In 2007, she and a friend, Brandon Roghes, AKA Boutee Ondflow, saw an article about the Big Easy Rollergirls from nearby New Orleans and decided that Baton Rouge needed a team of its own. They called their friends and posted their idea on Craig's List. Six women showed up to their first practice at Baton Rouge's Skate Galaxy, and RSRD was born.

The women, none of whom knew each other previously and none of whom had any roller derby experience, taught themselves the game from the ground up. By the beginning of their first real season, the team had grown to ten players, which for a game that is played five-on-five was very small indeed. Still, the women moved forward, and started their first season in October of 2008. They played three away games before their Inaugural Brawl in January 2009.

By the time that I joined the league in October of 2009, they were thirty women strong. Most senior skaters attribute this to the Whip It effect. New girls showed up at practices every week, and for many, I was just another faceless skater that might not stick around. Retention was something of a problem for the team. Star skaters like Abita Hoedown and Dee Zasta had stopped showing up reliably, and no one knew if they were taking temporary or permanent leave.

I'd say that I came in at a very uncertain time. Going in to their second full season, RSRD was determined to grow, and they were growing, but only in numbers. New girls like me came in not knowing how to skate or stop. The captain and co-captains of the team, Sigga Please and Zarathrustya were both solid senior skaters, committed since day one, but they scarcely knew how to handle the changing face of the team. Should we break into two teams? If so, should we break evenly or separate skaters by skill level? Dividing the teams up was an intensely emotional moment for the training committee.

“What if the girls in the sub pool never get to play?”

“Then they don't get to play.” That was me. I was a member of the sub pool, the group of girls who don't have teams but fill in when other players are injured or unavailable, but it was my goal for the team to be as strong as possible, and I didn't think that girls who weren't strong players should get to bout just because. “I don't want to play if I'm going to be a liability. I only want to play if I'm an asset.”

Other players didn't feel this way, though. Like all of us, they wanted to compete. This is where the individual ego of the player began to interfere with the overall success of the team. To my eyes, everyone *should* have to prove themselves on the track before they went up against other teams. To others, the democratic system was more important. They felt that *everyone* should get a shot, regardless of skill level.

Even though I didn't have any experience on teams, I had sort of a social Darwinist approach to the idea, even if it meant that in the survival of the fittest I might get left behind. This kind of conflict is avoided in traditional sports structures, in which rosters are determined strictly by skill level, but in roller derby, these arguments are inherent. It's fair to say that, while I loved the punk DIY ethos of the sport, I felt like *winning* was actually most important.

In the end, RSRD decided to try both approaches at once. The roster was complicated, with some skaters on the All-Star team, others in the sub pool, but all divided into two evenly-matched intraleague teams. The eventual goal was for the league to have two teams, an All-star team and a B-team, but at the time, there simply wasn't enough variance in skill level to support that system. The league is now divided into two teams: the all-star Diables Rouges and the b-team Capital Defenders. Skaters who have completed their minimum skills requirements but who are not place on teams are considered part of the sub pool.

The formal structure of the team isn't limited to rosters. There is a league board composed of the officers of each committee (training, sponsorship, fund raising, bout production, etc.), the captains and co-captains from each team, the secretary and treasurer, and the league president. These are all elected positions, and elections are held at the beginning of each season. Rules and guidelines for player conduct and requirements are determined by the board and recorded in the bi-laws. Each skater is expected to know and understand the bi-laws, but in reality, most of them don't. If you asked most RSRD girls where to find the bi-laws they'd probably respond with something like, "Mad Hitter is over there. I think she goes both ways."

Part of the problem with running an all-volunteer sports organization is that rules, by necessity, have to be somewhat flexible. It's really hard for RSRD to bench one of their best players because she didn't meet attendance requirements. The league is just gaining momentum, so there's a lot of in-fighting about what rules should be bent, when, and for whom. In the 2010-2011 season, the league has become a lot stricter, partially due to a change in leadership, and partially because we are applying to become a WFTDA-sanctioned league, and their requirements are more stringent than ours might be alone.

## **Chapter Six: The Red Stick Roller Derby Warrior Tribe: Rituals, Rites of Passage, and Social Structure**

When I first got involved with RSRD, I was obsessed with all the traditions, rituals and informal kinship structures that the team had. Players took on alternate names and tattooed them on their bodies. Skaters had derby sisters, derby wives, and derby widows. Senior skaters wore necklaces. I didn't know what any of it meant, but as an amateur anthropologist, I was determined to find out. What I know now is that, while some of these structures are RSRD-specific, most of them stem from the wider derby community.

Why does roller derby, unlike other organized sports, need such a sophisticated, but informal, set of customs? Because for the women who play roller derby, it becomes more than a sport. For many, it becomes their primary social structure or at least a really important secondary one. And if you happen to be a traditional structuralist, like me, then you'll probably agree that people have an inherent need to keep these social systems organized so that members can continue to feel a sense of comfort, support, and stability.

Women new to roller derby are called fresh meat. You become fresh meat the minute you strap on your skates and hit the floor. Since mid-2010, months after my arrival, RSRD has had a fresh meat training program that keeps inexperienced skaters separated from the rest of the team. They are coached by our head ref, Skunk, at the smaller end of the rink. They do their own warm-ups and drills, and their only chance to circulate with the rest of the team at practice is while skating up.

When I came to RSRD there was no formal separation between fresh meat and the other skaters, but the divide was nonetheless obvious. Newer skaters dropped their bags at the tables closest to the entrance and geared up there, while senior skaters geared up further from the entrance. This spatial difference is less pronounced now, with skaters of all levels intermingling at tables, but it is, perhaps, the formal separation of the fresh meat that allows this informal mixing to take place.

Fresh meat are basically invisible to everyone but themselves. I'd say that it took a full two months of regular attendance for most people, outside my fellow freshies and already friends, to notice me. Eyes glazed over when I spoke during stretches. Even on the track, skaters who didn't know me ignored me unless my physical presence was a hindrance or an asset.

“You need to skate smaller, you keep tripping me in the pack.”

“You, what's your name again, stay on the inside line. Good, just stay there.”

Until I became more senior on the team, I thought my initial invisibility was somehow personal. But it's not. The truth is that in my year and a half with the team, I have watched at least thirty women come and go, and I really can't be bothered to keep up with the names and faces of girls who aren't going to last but a few practices. New girls are like Columbus's ships to my Hispanola. I honestly can't see them until I get used to the idea that they're really there.



Every single woman I spoke with told me that she didn't feel like part of the group initially. Erin Mullen, AKA Liv Freaky, who was fresh meat at the time of our interview told me, "Honestly, I wouldn't say that I feel welcome at practice. I see the closeness of the relationships that the women on the team have, and the camaraderie, but I don't really feel like I'm a part of it."

Karen Moss, AKA Glock Strap, who is a deputy sheriff by day said, "People weren't mean to me or anything when I came, but they weren't exactly friendly, either. I showed up to practice for the first time in my uniform, and everyone just looked at me like, 'Oh shit, why are the cops here?' I felt like I was getting a lot of bitch-face. Even the girls in my fresh meat class weren't really talking to me. But eventually, I made friends with Maggot, who is now my derby wife, and Oceans, and we started spending a lot of time together. Then, after I had graduated from fresh meat and people could see that I wasn't going anywhere, I guess I began to feel more accepted."

The importance of proving your commitment to the sport and to the team is crucial to social acceptance. Some women do it by proving their athletic skill on the track. In this sense, players who come in with previous sports or skating experience get to have a shorter hazing period. It is a sport, after all, and if you show you've got what it takes to take the team to a new level, your value is pretty immediately obvious.

Women with fewer skills find other ways to ingratiate themselves with the group. I, for example, started a website. Caitlin Cleveland, AKA Rock Bottom, a student at LSU and would-be rap star, made songs about the team. Other players find that their professional skills can make them an asset, and they join committees and contribute accordingly. Some people volunteer for everything from Jambalaya sales to bike washes. Some people find acceptance through simple longevity.

One way that the team copes with the initial disenfranchisement of the fresh meat skaters is by assigning them derby sisters. Derby sisters are assigned by league-wide mama hen and captain of the Capital Defenders, Kristy Norris, AKA Violet Reaction. The point is to pair up a senior skater with a newer skater so that the newbie has someone to answer her questions, talk to her about her skills, or simply to *recognize* her face at practice.

Nine months into my derby tenure, I was excited to finally be assigned big sister status. When Sharon Tohline, AKA Villainelle was assigned to me as her sister I skated up to her at practice. "Hey," I said, "I know what your name means! We're both literature dorks!"

She gave me a shy smile.

"Are you a poet?" I asked.

I don't really remember how she responded, but I'm sure she made some quietly witty remark. I don't know why it was decided that we'd be a good pair, but we were. We are both bookish types and writers, although I am less outwardly intellectual than she. Villainelle, or Vill, as I like to call her, used our sisterhood as an opportunity to get to know me, and by proxy the team-at-large, better.

"I saw that you needed help moving and I thought, 'I can do that!' she told me. "That day was the first time that I ever hung out with any of the senior skaters. Tricky and I were packing your attic and you just had all this weird stuff up there, poufy pink prom dresses, glue guns, tons of

Mardi Gras beads, little battery-powered lanterns... we just couldn't stop laughing. Also, I found out she was going to grad school, so we realized we had that in common."

Not to mention the fact that going through someone else's bizarre mish-mash of belongings sort of instantly bonds you to them. I remember watching Vill fill a box in my kitchen with a window fan, string of neon lights, coffee maker, and several embroidered dishtowels and saying, "We really don't know each other, but I really want to thank you for helping me." I was really blown away that someone who didn't know me at all was willing to help me with a task that even the closest of my friends didn't really want to have to deal with.

My derby sisterhood with Vill has evolved into a true sisterhood of sorts. We are now roommates. We go to practice together, walk our dogs together, and stay up late into the night talking or staging TV-on-DVD marathons. Our lives have become completely intertwined. While all derby sisterhoods don't turn out this well – I have just been assigned a new sister whose face I might not be able to pick out of a crowd of two— ours is a really good example of the way that this derby-constructed kinship connection can help women negotiate unfamiliar, and sometimes unwelcoming, social territory.

The next stage of derby kinship is derby wifedom. To civilians, the notion of taking a derby wife instantly reinforces the mainstream's Sapphic fantasies about the sport. In actuality, dating between wives is rare, and is somewhat frowned upon. Even within this very informal kinship structure, there exists a kind of incest taboo.

Kristen Adolphi, AKA Krissy Krash, of the LA Derby Dolls told me that girlfriends can't also be wives. "There are no consequences for it or anything," she said, "but it's just that derby wives are like your derby BFFs. You wouldn't take a derby wife as a girlfriend because it would be like incest, like marrying your sister or something. A derby wife holds back your hair when you puke, fixes your skates, and tells you that your ass looks hot in your hotpants. The problem is that in derby, relationships don't last long, but derby wives are forever. You can fuck your wife, like a drunken hook-up or whatever, but you can't be in a relationship with her. Relationships are drama...but it's not really about sexuality, it's about protecting the team."

Because the intricacies of the relationship are so complex, derby wives are chosen and not assigned, and skaters pair up at drastically different paces. Choosing a derby wife is like deciding who your soul mate is, who you're going to be willing to stick by and who's going to be willing to stick by you. Personally, I didn't feel "mature" enough as a member of the team to choose a wife until I bouted for the first time. I guess I likened bouting with the team as a puberty-related rite of passage that I had to get through before I could choose a mate.

When I did choose my wife, I chose Rock Bottom, because she was the best player on my intra-league team at the time, the Heartbreakers. After our first bout, in which I think she scored about a million points, I skated up to her excitedly and said, "I love you! I think I want to marry you!"

Surprised because we didn't know each other very well, but sweet enough to be charming about it, she said, "Don't toy with my emotions..."

After I got down on one knee and proposed, I hugged her and wrapped my legs around her waist, skates and all. She was strong enough to support both of us, so I knew I had chosen well.

Not all derby wifedoms turn out this well. One of the complicating factors is that it's really hard to say no to someone, and since the act of asking someone to marry you is, in itself, a performative utterance, there's no extended ritual through which to test the validity of the partnership.

A skater I know well ended up with a wife that she kind of dislikes. "She just proposed. And I didn't know what to say. I wanted to say, 'No, I don't know you, and we don't have anything in common, but I just didn't feel like I could.'"

Now she has to brace herself when she sees her wife coming to deal with the impact of each partner's differing ideas of the relationship. She's also been able to deal with the incompatibility of her first derby marriage by taking another wife on another team. Provided that all parties are gaim, polygamy and interleague marriage are accepted, if somewhat reluctantly, by traditionalists. I currently have three wives, all of whom have other wives, as well.

So, if you can just marry anyone at any time, you might be wondering, what purpose does derby marriage serve? Well, for one thing, it commits players to one another, even if they have divergent ideas about what that commitment means. It gives players a reliable support structure. Even if you don't like your wife, you're going to answer the phone when she calls. And just like in "real world" partnerships, sometimes one person just isn't enough. Polygamy allows players to have a more extensive support structure if they need it.

In my case, having a stable of wives is crucial. I love all three of my wives, but I have my most committed relationship with my first wife, Rock. From the beginning, we used our partnership as an excuse to get to know one another. After our lightning quick nuptials, we did everything together. She patiently taught me to skate around cones in parking lots and I handed her beers beneath my coat when she wasn't old enough to drink legally. It is her bearing necklace that I wear.

Which brings me to the bearing necklace ritual. This is a tradition that includes not just players, but also refs, as well. Everyone receives a necklace with a skate bearing on it after their first bout. It happens at practice, with little fanfare, but it is, for some, a defining moment. It is a fetish that symbolizes your inclusion in the team. The way people choose to wear their bearing necklaces shows a lot about them and their sense of belonging. When I first got my bearing necklace, I only wore it to derby-related events. But I wore it religiously to those events, without fail, and putting it on became the last step in my derby preparations for every practice, party, or bout.

And then, somewhere between Baton Rouge and the West Coast, I lost it. It freaked me out a little, as I had developed a somewhat superstitious attachment to it, but I tried not to think too

much of it. I also tried not to mention the loss to other girls on my team, lest it be seen as somehow symptomatic of dwindling loyalty.

Finally, though, I told my first wife, Rock, that I wanted her to give me hers. It had been hanging from her rearview mirror since it had been given to her, dangling in the sunlight as a shiny reminder of what I had lost. Rock didn't wear hers because she's just not a jewelry-wearing kind of girl, and also because she was such an inimitable badass from the beginning that she really didn't need to prove to anyone that she was on the team.

On a clear winter day, as I drove her home in her car, she unfastened it from the mirror and placed it around my neck.

"With this bear-ring I thee wed?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, squinting at me through the sunlight with her clear blue eyes.

## Chapter Seven: Roller Derby Saved My Soul: Stories from the RSRD Girls

### *Becoming Zarathrustya*

*Roller derby ruined my life, but it was no life worth living.*

-Mary Koehler, AKA Zarathrustya

When I started with Red Stick, Zarathrustya had just been elected co-captain of the team. She seemed, to me, equal parts cautious and assertive. Her thoughtfulness was immediately apparent through the measured way she chose her words. Other women on the team looked up to her, not just because she was *the* founding member or because she was in charge, but because she thought carefully before giving advice and instruction. She was also beautiful, with giant brown eyes and waves of dark hair to her waist. She always wore fishnets with visible garters under her short uniform skirt and smeared her lipstick defiantly across her porcelain doll's face.

She was hot and tough, and as evidenced by her Nietzsche-inspired moniker, also brainy as hell. But she hadn't always been that way. As a teenager, Zara, like so many roller girls, had been a geek. Not just the kind of plain jane who didn't get asked out a lot, but the kind that buried herself in pen and ink drawings of wolves and fantasy creatures and actively immersed herself in role playing games. She wasn't athletic and she never felt like she was, in conventional terms, particularly pretty. Teenage Zara was, then, a nerd. But a really creative one. At 17, she met a boy and began a four-and-a-half year relationship.

By the time she was 21, they were living together with two dogs, two cats, and two pet rats. They were planning to be married, and everything seemed relatively stable. And then Zara had the genius idea to start a roller derby team in Baton Rouge and everything changed. She wrote on Live Derby Girls, "The recurring complaint I received from my fiancé during the year I began roller derby was that I was 'never home anymore,' or that he never got to see me because I was always out with my teammates (read: newfound family). We practiced two days a week and I sometimes went out with the team afterwards, but not to an ungodly hour as I was under constant pressure to come home. Soon the tables turned, we developed opposite schedules and before long I felt as though I were sleeping next to a stranger (Koehler 2010).

It wasn't just the time commitment that starting a league required that forged a wedge between Zara and her betrothed. Zara herself had changed. "I wasn't the one who was never home any more," she says, "rather it was quiet little Mary K, the failed artist with a serious self image problem and no voice or direction of her own who was making fewer and fewer appearances. She packed her shit and signed the lease over to her stronger, more assertive and self-assured counterpart, Zarathrustya (Koehler 2010). Shy, amiable Mary Koehler evolved into Zarathrustya: a brassy, ballsy, sexy badass.

In the end, Zarathrustya turned Mary Koehler into the woman she wanted to be: a leader and a fighter. Truth be told, it is near impossible for me to imagine Zara as a wilting flower. She has always been a derby role model to me, and in various personal ways as well. To me, she has always been *Zara*, and I have sometimes cringed when I hear her referred to as Mary.

This discrepancy in naming is significant. For derby girls, the act of taking on a derby name is another rite of passage. There are no hard and fast rules about when you get to do it, but there is an underlying sense that a derby name must be earned. Girls who walk into practice for the first time begging to be called “Bad Girl X” or whatever are immediately regarded with suspicion. As for Zara, there must be some actual *transformation*, personal or otherwise, than accompanies the name change. For Zara it meant becoming a more aggressively idealized version of herself. It signified, in a sense, the death of Mary Koehler, along with the destruction of her pre-derby life. This act of simultaneous self-destruction and creation is one of the defining factors in how derby comes to dominate so much of the players’ lives. Playing roller derby, for many, is not just a hobby or leisure activity, it is an act and process of *becoming*.

### ***Dizz-integration***

*I had temper problems. I would get frustrated and throw stuff around. But when I started derby, I stayed pretty docile around my house and husband. We used to have blowout, call-the-police kinds of fights, but then I just got a lot calmer.*

-Desiree Plemmons, AKA Dizzintegrator

A lot of women come to derby with a lot of expectations about what they’re going to get out of it. Dizz came to practice looking for an outlet for her anger, a way to get into shape, and a way to meet new friends. Dizz did make new friends, one in particular, Ocean’s Motion, who became her derby wife, and her social life started to grow. Only, her husband wasn’t really that happy about the amount of time that Dizz began spending with Ocean’s and the team.

“He liked derby initially,” she said, “until I started hanging out every night. I started spending every night with Ocean’s, talking and stuff. And then I started realizing that I was unhappy and that I didn’t want to go home. He actually gave me an ultimatum. He said, ‘it’s me or Ocean’s,’ and I was like, ‘Ocean’s is on my team, and there’s no way I’m giving up my team.’”

Dizz partially attributes her unhappy home life to the dishonesty of her husband. She found out that he was failing out of school and trying to hide it from her. He didn’t pay bills, even though they had the money, and soon collection agencies were calling. It got so bad that lawsuits were being filed against them. And their intimate relationship wasn’t going so well either. “We didn’t have sex all that year,” she said, “all he did was play video games.”

About a year into derby, Dizz began a relationship with a fan named Jon. At first, they only saw each other at derby-related events. “I met him at practice after a knee injury. From Ocean’s I found out that he was married, but almost separated. I started talking to him about helping me with some of RSRD’s non-profit application paperwork, and then we started running together in the RSRD running group.” Eventually, they began chatting online and meeting outside of practice. “I think I started the affair because I found out my husband was lying to me about all this stuff and I thought that if I slept with another man that I could hurt him, too. I wasn’t thinking about getting into a relationship with Jon.”

The formerly-angry Dizz, who threw things and yelled a lot gave way to a calmer, more assertive Dizz that had secrets of her own. Although she was trying to keep everything quiet with Jon, her husband became suspicious. “He told me that he knew that Ocean’s was trying to set me up with Jon, and it made me feel so weak when he said that, like I could just be set up for something.”

The newly confident Dizz responded to her husband's condescending remarks by spending less and less time at home and eventually moving out into her own apartment. Her husband moved to Georgia, where he intends to file for divorce.

"I haven't even told a lot of my family about our break up. I guess I'm more embarrassed about the marriage than anything else. We dated for eight or nine years and then were married only eighteen months. I mean, I knew getting married wasn't the right decision, but I saw all my friends getting married and we bought a house, and I just didn't want to pay into something that wasn't going to last."

For Dizz, coming into derby and the friendships that went along with it meant having an awakening of sorts. Dizz, as it turned out, could only let go of her anger by letting go of some ideas of herself that were personally-ingrained and also culturally established. Dizz became a woman who did not do what her parents and those around her expected of her. She broke out of a traditional relationship that *seemed* stable but was unfulfilling in favor of a new shaky independence. And it hasn't been easy.

"I miss my husband, but it's like he was toxic. I just couldn't trust him," she said, "but at least I knew he loved me, and now I have to start all over again."

All the changes in her life led to new kinds of anxieties. "My work is really being affected. I sit at the computer and worry about my budget and making ends meet. I'm on anxiety medication. I feel really vulnerable."

And sitting on my couch, tears welling up slowly, Dizz *looks* vulnerable. But it is a vulnerability that is the result of facing the dissatisfaction of her life and making active steps to change it. It is evidence of the necessary softening of a girl who now takes action instead of throwing temper tantrums.

### ***Hannah Konda***

*I was trying to be a good mom the way my mom was a good mom. Suddenly, I met a group of women who had collectively decided that it's okay for girls to have balls, and that if you don't fit into that box you've been trying to fit yourself into, that's okay, you can just bust that box right open.*

-Julie Nellon, AKA Hannah Konda

Hannah is a woman who thought she knew what she was looking for when she came to derby, but ended up getting a lot more than she bargained for. She's a thirty-nine year old accountant with a seventeen year-old daughter, and talking to her for even a moment, it's easy to pick up on her easy-going self-awareness. She said, of starting derby, "I was seventeen years in to a difficult relationship and I felt stuck and angry. The stress of it all was making me sick, and my counselor told me that I should do something with my aggression. I started looking for a sport to play. I liked the idea of roller derby because I had done theatre, and in derby, I thought that I would get to combine theatre and sport and also get to hit someone."

Hannah had, by the time she came to RSRD, been divorced from her husband for more than five years. But the couple/not-couple was still living together in order to present a united parenting

front to their daughter Regan. Hannah's ex-husband is a touring blues musician who was out of town a lot, so the responsibility lay on Hannah to be the stabilizing force in her family's life.

"I was his anchor for twenty years. He was this flaky artistic type and I was an accountant who knew how to take care of business. We stayed together for the sake of logistics, and over the years we had worked out the kinks."

One of the more important kinks was that while the couple was co-habiting and co-parenting, they weren't a *couple* in the traditional sense of the word. Hannah knew that her husband had flings when he was away from home. She didn't ask questions about them and when he spent summers on the road he turned a blind eye to her boyfriends. It seemed like they had developed a non-traditional, but working, partnership. And it seemed like derby was going to integrate well into that partnership.

"At first derby was a good thing for my relationship with my husband. It gave us a break from each other and then I had my own social type stuff to do – I had my own thing."

Hannah really needed to find new social opportunities. She had a small group of friends with whom she had socialized regularly for years, but she found those relationships to be mostly unsatisfying. "Prior to derby," she said, "those women were my only outlet. I started spending time with them on a more regular basis as a way to get out of my house. These were women who liked to shop, who liked to get their nails done, girly girls. We never had that much in common, but they were the only non-work peers I had."

As Hannah became more engrossed in her derby life, her stable of female friends became increasingly more critical of her new lifestyle and look. When she showed up to a Halloween party in derby gear, they asked, "What are you supposed to be?"

"I don't know, I guess I'm a derby zombie." Really, she had just shown up to the party after an RSRD event.

"Well," they told her, "you look like a lesbian."

Hannah was really affected by her old friends' hostility to her new pursuits. "It was really painful," she said, "I had spent years with these women. And these were the kind of women that called every day, that wanted to tell you their business, that wanted to hear your business. And of course, they told each other your business, too."

The business of derby was preventing Hannah from keeping regular dates with her women friends, but it was also giving her a new support structure.

"There was a big group of girls who started when I did and we were all excited about derby, we had all been bit by that bug. It was energizing. They were women from all walks of life and we had something in common right off the bat because we were all consumed with derby. We always had something to talk about besides gossip. And since we played a sport together, you didn't find that traditional female pecking order or an underlying sense of distrust. We got all that competitive stuff out on the track."



Like so many new skaters, Hannah found that she was spending more and more time with the RSRD girls and less and less time at home. “Derby was *hard*. That first practice was a real shocker, I had never worked my body so hard in my life. But as hard as derby was, it was easier than going home.” Despite the learning curve, Hannah was choosing derby over her old life more and more often. “I needed to prove to myself that I could do something that I thought I couldn’t do,” she said.

Actually, Hannah found that she could do a lot of things she hadn’t been able to do before. She could compete athletically with women ten years younger than she; she could break away from the constraints of her home life, and she could form satisfying relationships with women. “I had always gotten along better with men,” she said.

One of the women she began spending time with, Amy Hester, AKA Sour Patch Kid, soon became her derby bride. Although the women had more than a decade between them, they found the derby bond bridged that gap. Hannah had an extra bedroom in her house and Patch had a bad living situation, so within a few months, Patch had moved in to Hannah’s home. Once they were living together and playing together, the women became even closer, and Hannah had a witness to the complications of her home life.

“She [Patch] said she could see how unhappy I was,” Hannah told me. Patch might have been more aware of that sadness for the simple fact that Hannah had been living with it for so long, and had made a decision to push aside her disappointing relationship with her husband until her daughter was older. “Breaking away from that relationship was something I had thought about for years. I always thought that as soon as Regan went off to college I would just jump on the back of someone’s Harley –anyone’s—and start a whole new life.”

All the changes in Hannah’s life were creating a lot of escalating tension. Her teenage daughter developed a crush on Patch, and Patch, it turned out, had issues of her own. “It wasn’t very long into our derby marriage that Patch came to me and told me that she thought she might be gay,” Hannah said.

So, there Hannah was living in a house with her newly gay derby wife, extremely rebellious teenage daughter (also newly gay), and her semi-estranged husband. The friendships she had had for years had broken down and were being replaced by new ones. The romantic relationship she had thought of as unhappy, but workable for twenty years was beginning to seem less and less so. And Hannah herself was becoming more and more outspoken. “All of a sudden,” she said, “I was saying, ‘No,’ and ‘Fuck no!’ to stuff I had let go for years.”

But Hannah wasn’t just learning to say no to other people, she was also learning to say yes to her own desires. One night after an RSRD party, Hannah and Patch stumbled into their home drunkenly. “She walked into my bedroom and she just closed the door,” Hannah said. “We talked and laughed for a while, but then I think it was me that made the first move.” Breaking the derby-based incest taboo, Hannah started sleeping with her derby wife.

Because she often eavesdropped on her mother’s comings and goings, Hannah’s daughter Regan was the first to know. When Regan saw Patch walking into her mother’s bedroom that first time, she said, “Be careful.”

Hannah's husband wasn't home often and it took him a lot longer to catch on to the affair. But instead of approaching Hannah about it directly, he went to Regan, who was happy to give up her mother's secrets. "I felt like we had an unspoken understanding about our relationship. We had had something in the past and it didn't work, but we were sticking it out for Regan. He had always cheated, and we were no longer married, so I didn't feel like I was doing anything wrong. But all of a sudden, he felt threatened. He found out about her and then he wanted to be husband of the year and go to counseling, things he had never wanted to do before."

But, for Hannah, it was already too late. The relationship she had formed with Patch was emotionally significant, and she wasn't ready to give it up, despite the complications and the fact that she considered herself primarily heterosexual. Her husband moved out. "Clearly," she said, "what I was doing before, playing it safe, wasn't working. But it's like taking on a sport that I couldn't play; I did something I didn't know I could do by ending that relationship."

Hannah is now living with girlfriend and derby wife, Patch, and her daughter, Regan, who is in-and-out of rehab. The day I interviewed her she told me that her boss had ordered her to have a Xanax and a martini on her lunch break. When I asked if it was all worth it, she said, "Yes, because I'm being truer to me now than I have been in years. Once you've jumped off the edge of a cliff it gets easier to do the next time because you're still alive to do it."

Hannah found that derby had both a blurring and clarifying effect on her life. While some of the boundaries she had previously marked out for herself, such as her roles as a straight wife and mother, got hazier, her perspective on her own desires got clearer. Through derby, Hannah learned that she could take control of those desires and take risks, and that even if everything fell apart, she wouldn't be in it alone. "The team always cheers," she said, "Even if they don't agree with what you're doing, they always cheer."

### ***Saving Villainelle***

*From the outside, derby may look like just another game. It may look like a bunch of rag-tag misfit girls. Or, if you're watching the newbies skate, it may look more like a bunch of baby giraffes tripping over their own legs. Either way, when you watch derby women skate around the track, you can't possibly know how strong they are. You can't possibly know that each one has been broken down into pieces, has seen herself split wide open and bare. You don't know what derby has done for them; you only see the end result.*

-Sharon Tohline, AKA Villainelle

Villainelle is the kind of woman who's easy to trust. She is equal parts generosity and honesty. While she is enchantingly self-deprecating, she can't help but get excited about new ideas, people or situations. Her quiet personality often erupts into enthusiastic outbursts. When I look at her I see a small ball of energy in a constant process of slow motion explosion. She also has the kind of gentle beauty that is often mistaken for vulnerability, that seems accessible, but is actually the soft casing of something very powerful. It's a power that she wields gracefully but hasn't always been aware of.

A few years before derby, she was raped by a person she trusted. Her world fell apart. "I left L.A. – a city I love dearly – and moved home to Baton Rouge because of what happened – because I suddenly couldn't move, couldn't hold down a job, couldn't think straight," she wrote,

“I quit my career as an academic and a teacher because standing in front of a classroom gave me panic attacks. My life got derailed just as it was picking up steam – just as I thought I was finally landing where I wanted to be.”

She moved back to her family’s home in Baton Rouge until she got embroiled in a long relationship with a man who turned out to be abusive. She moved with him to a country town where she had no connections. “Small, scarred women who’ve lost their confidence,” she said, “make awfully good prey for rotten guys, and I managed to find one and stayed with him for nearly two years. He was the sort who shouted and threw things, who wanted to know where I was at all hours. He was the sort who insisted I was wrong when I knew I was right, who would tell me the sky was orange just to make me think I’d lost my mind. He was the sort who left bruises too, as though I didn’t have enough already. He was the sort who thought I needed to be ‘tamed.’”

After finally ending that relationship, she found herself in Baton Rouge, again, working a shitty retail job at the Mall of Louisiana, as she had in college. Only, at 28, she wasn’t the same person she had been in college. She was lost, floating around aimlessly in her own life, and she knew it. “When I finally left him, I felt as though I barely had a body or an identity left to cling to. I was exhausted and terrified. When my best friend Sarah, AKA CupQuake, invited me to join derby with her in April, it somehow seemed like the perfect answer. Derby, I thought, could teach me how to be tough (Tohline 2010).”

When Villainelle came to practice for the first time, she felt weak. She tripped over her skates and felt increasingly inadequate with every fall. Then something clicked. “In one of our first lessons, the refs explained to us the importance of recovery in a bout. Falling isn’t such a big deal; what matters is getting back up again. That was when I realized something I’d never noticed about myself: I’m a born derby bitch. Because I never go down for good. Things have been rough in the past, but I’ve found my way out,” she wrote.

Villainelle learned that the toughness she’d come to find in derby was something she’d already brought with her. “Before the first time I touched the track I’d already been juking and blocking and standing my ground. I’d been falling and rising over and over. And I’d never given myself credit for any of that. I’d paid too much attention to the falls, not enough to the recovery.” Vill, like me, had very physical derby practice epiphanies. She fell down. She got up. She got knocked down. She got up. The point wasn’t that she fell. The point was that she always recovered.

But, for Vill, acknowledging her resilience wasn’t enough. She also needed to come to terms with the mysterious sense of guilt she felt about it. “I am a person who can be manic and intense, she wrote on Live Derby Girls. “I have a great deal of passion and anger and sensitivity stored up inside myself, and I have spent my life suspecting that those feelings are somehow out-of-bounds. I know that people have difficulty handling the more volatile aspects of my personality; I know that they prefer the sweetheart face and the easy manner. I know that they do not know how to react when the passionate side comes out. So I regulate that side of myself with apology. I say ‘I’m sorry’ when I step over an imaginary line of sensibility – when what I’m feeling somehow seems too overpowering. I apologize when I am most human. I apologize for existing. But I do not apologize in derby.”

The kind of psychoemotional empowerment that Villainelle needed to uncover in herself had to be literally knocked out of her. Jarring it, though, required not physical abuse but the kind of consensual and mutual use of force that women find on the track. “I know that if I stop being aware of myself – even for a second – one of my teammates will slam her body into mine and knock me down to wake me up. Roller derby reminds me that I’m a real person. It asks every girl on the track to know her own weaknesses – and to understand her own power. Because derby teaches us that we’re real – that the nebulous mass of thoughts and feelings we call a self exists in a solid state in a solid world. It teaches us that our presence is undeniable – that we matter, even when we try not to.”

It may seem counterintuitive to posit that a woman can recover from physical and sexual trauma by subjecting herself to another kind of physical trauma, which is how many people look at roller derby. But that’s just the thing. Sharon Tohline did not have a *choice* about being raped. She did not make a *decision* to be punched in the face by her boyfriend over a casual dinner with friends. Villainelle went to practice and got to make decisions about who touched her, how far it was going to go, and how she was going to respond in turn. Villainelle was not being *subjected to* anything. Villainelle thought she needed saving. But she didn’t. She needed roller derby to show her that she had already saved herself.

### ***Making Room for Rock Bottom***

*I don’t fit into any one world, which makes me ironically like a lot of people. A handful of these people reconcile this issue by playing roller derby. I get together with these people at roller rinks, bars, homes, parades: anyplace that permits public hotpanting. No matter the place, it feels a lot like a womb. Warm and comfortable. My teammates don’t always get me, but they get not being gotten.*

-Caitlin Cleveland, AKA Rock Bottom

Caitlin Cleveland was something of a child prodigy. She didn’t get a master’s degree at age five or anything, but she was definitely the golden child of her large family and her small strict Catholic school. She was the kind of girl who did everything right and well and did it with a wide smile and genuine sincerity. She was the all-American girl, with rosy milk fed cheeks and a shiny mane of blonde hair. She was a three-sport athlete in high school, a basketball all-star that competed in the Junior Olympics at age 16. She got good grades. She won awards for being a good athlete, a good citizen, and a good Christian. She honored God and her family in public and private; and, when her dad died of cancer in her senior year of high school, she decided she would honor her father’s memory by carrying out his oldest, greatest wish for her: to play ball for Tulane.

Her father had played football there and so had his father before him and so on. She played a different sport, but she was still carrying on the family tradition. She was all set up to be exactly the kind of Cleveland she was supposed to be: successful, kind, dependable, and Catholic.

But a semester into school, Caitlin discovered that the things she had found so easy to do in the past—playing basketball, being the good kid, doing the right thing—weren't as rewarding as they used to be. She was exhausted from the long hours her basketball schedule demanded, and the friends and boys she expected to meet never materialized. Dissatisfied, Caitlin quit basketball, and she quit Tulane. She moved to Baton Rouge to attend LSU and dropped basketball in favor of having the “college experience.” She joined a sorority. Her mother was thrilled, but Caitlin, it turns out, wasn't the sorority type, despite the all-girls' schools and five sister family. She didn't like the restrictive dress and behavior codes the other girls followed. She didn't want to go to mixers in white dresses or flat iron her hair. She wanted to spend long days lying in the grass by the lake near the dorms and raise baby ducks and maybe roller skate. So, after her first year at LSU, she quit the sorority, too.

Halfway through her second year in Baton Rouge, Caitlin met a boy. He was from a town near her home in Kenner. He was nice (but Methodist!) and stable. He really liked her. She wanted to like him, too, but something about their relationship just didn't work. She found that the longer they were together, the less she wanted to be with him. She found keeping her virginity a little too easy but didn't worry too much, mainly because it fell in line with her morals. After a couple months, she quit the boy.

Caitlin had kissed boys before, but it wasn't very interesting for her. She couldn't be gay, though, because she was Catholic and being gay was bad. And, as she wrote, she also “thought, privately, that if I ever considered ‘letting myself be gay,’” she said, “I'd lose it all. My family and friends' affection. My reputation as a good kid. My place in heaven.” Caitlin wasn't sure about basketball or sororities or boys, but she was sure it wasn't okay to be gay, “even though I had no interest in boys. Not even a little. I told myself it was because I was busy being a basketball player. I made it through high school without my first kiss. Because I was busy.”

Still, sure as she was, Caitlin felt some compulsion to prove her heterosexuality. “Enter roller derby. Derby girls were pretty AND athletic, their sexuality, I thought, never questioned,” she wrote on Live Derby Girls. “I mean, they played in fishnets. I had been playing my sport for years in shorts to my shins, my hair slicked back to stay out of my face, worn as unattractively as possible. There's no makeup, smiling, or blowing kisses to the crowd in basketball. Here was my chance to express a certain untapped femininity through my natural draw toward athletics.”

But Rock Bottom didn't buy any fishnets. She didn't blow kisses to the crowd. She did, however, meet a lot of girls. Girls who kissed her spontaneously on rainy nights and sent her sentimental text messages from the grocery store. “Wish you were here,” they'd say elliptically. She told her family and friends about these bizarre new experiences and secretly started wondering why she kind of sort of enjoyed them. And then she met a girl at an RSRD practice. A woman, actually, senior to her by more than a decade.

After a long Mardi Gras of drinking and dancing, they ended up making out in Rock's car. Still, Rock resisted this new possible identity. She told the woman that she was *not* gay, but then kissed her in parking lots after practices. She told the woman she was *Catholic*, and that she wasn't going to give up her soul for fleeting pleasures. She told the woman all these things but

spent long nights with her curled up in a happy comma of sexual exploration. They roller skated together and lay by the lake in the springtime, holding hands and watching baby ducks.

“Slowly, painfully, each day an ounce of self hatred leaving my body, we fell for each other. I wondered how this could have happened,” she said, “I had survived all those basketball gays unscathed and unattracted. They were dykes. I was better than that. And then, just like that, I fell in love with a girl and into a pit of emo turmoil. The further I got into the relationship, the larger my secret life became. I’d one day have to reveal it to my loved ones, and I was sure they’d disown me and talk shit about their lez former friend.”

Rock spent a lot of time looking over her shoulder, wondering who was watching her and who was judging her. And then she got tired of it and quit. She gave in. She was scared not to be the girl she’d always been, a nice girl who would never embarrass her family. But she was, I think, more scared to let go of a very real emotional connection. So she didn’t. She didn’t quit on the woman, even though she sometimes wanted to and sometimes threatened to. But it wasn’t just because the pull of the woman was so great. It was also because, for the first time in her life, Rock didn’t have to conform to a given set of ideals. There are game rules in roller derby, but when it comes to the relationships you form there, all bets are off.

“Derby helped me shed my defensive skin,” she said. “While some girls become their alter egos or use the sport to escape from their realities, I really needed it for the opposite reasons. I needed to know it was okay for me to let go of the straight-laced alter ego I had presented myself as for years and truly face up to myself, the one I had been hiding all along. I needed to let go of that hold I had on myself and thaw the freeze that I had cultivated for so long, unable to love, explore, or look real hard at my questions. I found a sport and a girl who let me do that. I found myself.”

For Rock, the world of roller derby became not just a place where she could be herself but a place where she could become herself. She came out to most of the team before she came out to anyone else, and that gave her the confidence to talk to the other people in her life. The results were not what she expected. “Everybody still loves me,” she said, “It got pretty shitty in parts, but I haven’t lost anyone. I’m closer to my mom, and, though my dad died a few years ago, I know that his love for me is more unconditional now than ever.”

## Chapter Eight: Deconstructing Derby

*The thing is, we aren't perfect. And the people who expect us to be are just assholes. We fight sometimes. We backstab and nitpick. We form cliques and break confidences. We mess up. But I hope — with every ounce of my scarred and fragile derby heart, I hope that we don't turn away from each other in those moments. I hope that we don't give up. Because the moment we give up on each other is the moment we give in to the worst of the myths about women. If we overthrow our derbies because they don't fulfill our ideals, we're setting them up for failure. Expecting women to be perfect — to be everything and never fall short — is not a feminist act.*

-Villainelle

I stood in the doorway of the kitchen. The kitchen, again, site of so many barely veiled dramas. Leggings, tank top, knee pads, elbow pads, wrist guards, helmet and skates, I was all geared up for a happy roll in the soft Florida winter sun.

“You look ridiculous,” Elizabeth said, smirking. She was all perfume and haughtiness. “I can't believe you're going out in public like that. Let me get my camera.”

She followed me onto the sidewalk. I flashed a peace sign to her camera that I mentally removed my pointer finger from. Pivoting, I could still hear the flip flop of her leather wedge sandals disappearing behind me, so I turned up the volume and fled onto the street in a flash of guitar solos.

The people who expect us to be perfect are assholes. I wish someone had said that to me earlier in my life. I wouldn't, of course, have believed it, because until recently, I thought that if someone expected you to be perfect it meant they believed in you. I thought that there might be some possibility of being perfect; the perfect wife, student, lover, derby girl. I could have the tattoos and the degrees. I could have the perfect relationship. I thought I could have my pretty pretty dresses and my feminism. But I was wrong.

That's the thing that all the women here have in common. They were all wrong about something; a man, themselves, their sexualities. They all came to roller derby to find something right and they found something wrong in their lives that needed fixing. Or, like Villainelle and Rock, they realized that they didn't need fixing, they needed to let go of old ideas about themselves or other people's ideas about themselves and be the women they were already.

Letting go, being wrong, and falling down all seem like fairly passive modes of revelation. But in derby, nothing is just passive. Every yielding must be followed by an instantaneous exertion of force. Learning to play roller derby isn't just about knowing how to get knocked down, it's about getting up again. It's about learning how to hit back, how to move quickly and with agility when there is clear and present danger, and how to slow down and control the pace of the pack if you need to. It's about learning to perform as an individual within a group, a group that you have to trust with the full weight of your body.

Zarathrustya used derby as a weapon with which to destroy a small quiet part of herself that was holding her back. Dizz found that derby allowed her to step outside the constrictions of the roles laid out for her. Hannah's experience resulting in her busting the walls of the box she had been living in wide open. Villainelle made derby into a cathartic controlled method of coping with her

own trauma and recovery. Rock found a place she could be herself and a woman that she could do it with.

And they aren't the only ones. Derby almost always results in revelation for the women that play it. They learn that they are weak, that they are strong, and more importantly, that they are both things at the same time. They learn to trust in the skills of others where theirs' are lacking and impose their will where they are skillful. They learn that it's okay not to be perfect or that they already are perfect or that perfect is a fucking scam thought up by the man to keep women with balls in check. They learn not to be kept in check.

Roller derby opens up a space for women to relate to each other as bodies, as women, as concrete or ephemeral things, as bitches or sex kittens or neither or both. The performance of the sport enacts a fluid exchange of energy between the players, energy that can be absorbed, reflected, or deflected. It is an energy which is specifically and explicitly feminine. It is "no boys allowed" on the track, but we might want to hang out with you later if you play your cards right. It is feminism for the feminists and grrl power for the grrls.

And roller derby, like life and women and humanity, is not perfect. It is fucking hard and there will always be someone around who is better at it than you. The safe space of the team is not created without contradiction. Someone will hurt you. Someone will hate you. Someone will make passes at your lover and smile to your face. There will be assholes. But there will always be another someone behind them, and she will, at all costs, have your back. And she will be enough to keep you going until you recover or realize that you already have.



## Chapter Nine: My Own Personal Rock Bottom

*I'm not even really sure when I went from, "I'm just here as an experiment" to "I'm in this shit for life and probably getting a derby tattoo like next week." So, is roller derby still a writing project for me? Sure, obviously. But that's somehow become secondary, because there's a new, improved, derbified part of my brain that says FUCK ART, LET'S SKATE!* -

Tracey Duncan, AKA trAC/DC, March 2010

I was sitting on the stairs to our attic eating a ham sandwich. I hadn't been home in days, but Daniel didn't know that because he had been in New Orleans visiting friends. Professors with tenure and lovely duplexes in gentrified neighborhoods. I had been doing derby. My hair was a maelstrom of sweat and cigarette ashes.

"I can't watch you do this," he said.

"Do what?"

"Eat that." He formed his lips a flat line across his face.

I stared at him through the thickness of my hangover. I hadn't eaten pork for years, but I was hungry and tired and it was the only food in the house. My derby wife had left it there. It didn't make sense for him to care about it, anyways. He loved ham and had never been attached to my shaky vegetarianism.

"Seriously?" I asked through a dry mouthful. "What the big deal? You eat swine all the time."

"You don't," he said, "And it means something." He walked into our bedroom.

It seemed like every little something meant everything to Daniel at that point, except the things that mattered. It was okay if I didn't come home at night, but if I admitted that I had been smoking cigarettes, it was a problem. I could come home with visible hickeys, but I could not eat ham sandwiches.

My therapist, Arelys, who's been on my speed dial since about 2002, listened patiently to me freaking out on the phone.

"What THE FUCK? I'm fucking someone else and he's pissed off because I smoked a fucking cigarette?"

"Tracey," she said evenly, "When a person is having an affair, I think their partner always knows it on some level."

"If he knows I'm having an affair, then why doesn't he fucking call me on it, instead of getting pissed off at me about all this piddling shit and being all passive aggressive about it?"

"Because he's not like that. *You're* like that because you're a fighter. But he's not. And maybe now isn't the time, but sooner or later you're going to have to realize that just because people aren't willing to fight with you it doesn't mean that they don't love you."

“No, but he is fighting. About bullshit. And the rest of the time he’s too stoned or obsessed with his book to notice what I’m doing. He cares. I know he cares. But he cares selectively. And he only cares to mention what it’s easy to bring up.”

I was defensive. I felt guilty. I was having an affair and I was really mad at Daniel for not noticing or pretending not to notice. I was not being particularly self-conscious about the ways I was enacting an extremely adolescent melodrama in our home. I was acting up, and Daniel, my husband and apparently, guardian, wasn’t setting new boundaries. So I was trampling all over the ones that were already there. I could say that I didn’t mean to do it, but it would only be half true.

Sometime shortly before Mardi Gras, dressed in short derby shorts and a skimpy crop top, I had sat on his lap and daringly (within the context of our sexless relationship) tried to kiss him. With tongue. He playfully slid me off his lap, edging me away with his elbow in a reflexive move that we both knew well. I thought, “He doesn’t want me. He married his best friend.”

Well. Maybe so had I.

I had already been semi-crushing on my derby wife, the young and magnetically athletic and sincere Rock Bottom, for a few weeks, but something in that rejected kiss solidified the already growing wall between Daniel and I and broke down any last resistance I had in my pull towards her.

Spanish Town’s Saturday Mardi Gras parade was the last time I felt like we were together as a couple. In the daytime pictures of me that day, I am in a pink and black wig holding his arm and laughing happily. He is grilling sausages and entertaining our guests. By that evening we were passed out on opposite sides of the bed, not spooning. I got up in the middle of the night and wrote Caitlin an elliptical and avant gardist love poem and sent it to her the next morning for Valentine’s Day.

She was flattered, but confused. She didn’t get it. We were friends? She liked me? She had no idea what to think and I wasn’t really going to explain. Her lack of understanding was enough to make me feel jilted. My feelings clearly weren’t mutual. But I wanted to continue to pursue our growing friendship, so I tried to let it go. She sent me long emails from her home in Kenner letting me know how “great” she thought I was. They were sweet and bright glosses on a growing collection of confusing emotions.

After a long Fat Tuesday in Mamou, Caitlin and I found ourselves slow-dancing to a neo jug band in Lafayette, Louisiana. I leaned into her broad shoulders and rested my face in her hair. She drunkenly, but somewhat flirtatiously pushed me away and said, “You cannot make out with me.”

I was a gallon of bourbon into the night and cocky as all get-out. “Girl, I don’t need to make out with you. A bisexual belly dancer in the bathroom just gave me her phone number.”

We danced until the Saloon closed. Then we half-followed a drunk on a bicycle home until we were sure he wasn’t going to fall down in traffic. When, we stopped at a gas station on the way out of town, I kissed her. She leaned her neck back, and opening my eyes over it, I saw a car of men staring at us. They waved money at us and I flicked them off.

“This is disgusting,” she said, “let’s go.”

We pulled over a dozen times that night, in parking lots, fast food drive-thrus and on the side of highway, alternating between making out and her patient explanations that she wasn’t into me. Fine, I thought, I could accept that, but it was fucking Mardi Gras and my marriage was deteriorating and she was pretty and I was going to have a good time. And, as I accidentally confessed, I adored her. I loved her honesty and goodness and that she was fun and spontaneous and that we were able to connect so well despite being from totally different worlds.

When she dropped me off at my house, I said, “Kiss me goodnight.”

“No,” she responded. But she did it anyway.

I left for Savannah the next day to give a paper at an Anthropology conference. The temporary distance solidified, for her, our incompatibility. I didn’t know what to think. I wanted to love my husband simply and completely, the way I thought I always had. But my body responded to even passing thoughts of her with intense exhilaration.

It was pretty confusing on all counts. I didn’t actually feel any differently about Daniel, meaning I didn’t love him any less. We hadn’t had sex since our wedding day, almost a year before. He was never much of an instigator and I had given up. Why had I given up? Where was my angry drive to seduce him and my debilitating sense of rejection?

Over the course of the long road trip home from Georgia, I looked back at every dalliance I had had in the past decade carefully, real or imagined. All women, no men. Okay one, but he was my student and gay and it was just a pedagogical power play fantasy. Not women like Rock, though. It was all leggy model types and typical beauties. No broad shoulders. No baggy basketball shorts. I had always been attracted to the kind of girl I wanted to be, a sexy feminine ideal.

I jogged past Tricky’s house early one morning. She was awake, padding around in sweatpants. We drank coffee on her porch.

“I think I might be gay,” I told her.

She snorted. “Wouldn’t *that* make everything easier?” she asked.

“No, actually, I’m pretty sure it wouldn’t. I’m married. And I love my husband.”

“Yeah,” she said, “but so then if you were gay then this whole thing with Rock could be like not his fault and not about your relationship. It could just be about some fundamental biological need you have to fulfill”

“That doesn’t sound easy,” I said. It sounded terrifying. More than terrifying, it sounded wrong. It sounded like if I made the decision to be gay that I was somehow going to be able to get away with duplicitous and deceitful behavior and ride off into the sunset with my new sweet girlfriend on the back of a unicorn on a sunset of rainbows. Like Daniel wouldn’t be pissed or hurt or fucking devastated because I had some *fundamental biological need*.

I don’t think that many people think of me as a person who represses her needs and desires, but in reality, I was. I spent a lifetime seducing men because *they wanted to fuck me*. And when I did

give in to my deviant desires to be with women, I found women to fuck that I also wanted to be. Harvard graduates with delicately long torsos and spunky geek rock girls with pierced nipples. With Daniel, I found a way to avoid the responsibility of seduction and a way to embody my ideals. All of them. I got to be hot and tatted up and also married and totally respectable.

I got to be everything, the ineffable perfect that the assholes say is possible. And it wasn't enough. Because at the end of my period of self-examination, I realized that I didn't want to move to New York or Boston and be the quirky undersexed wife of an academic. I didn't want to live my life in an ivory tower in the suburbs of cool. I didn't want to be a cosmopolitan anymore. I wanted to stay in Baton Rouge. I wanted to play roller derby, eat ham sandwiches, get a dog, and have a relationship with someone with whom I felt mutual. Someone with a vagina.

Even after these realizations, though, it still wasn't clear to me that my marriage would end. Daniel and I, I thought, were bigger than these petty superficial structures. He didn't want to have sex with me, so surely he would be happy to be relieved of the burden. We could live out our lives as best friends in some polyamorous utopia. We might not have been soul mates in the way I had planned, but surely we would never be separated.

"Are you going to divorce me?" I asked him a few days after our come-to-Jesus, relationship-shattering conversation.

He looked at me incredulously. "What would *you* do, Tracey?" he asked.

Not that. I wouldn't have divorced him, not ever, no how. Not only was he my best friend, but he was also every ounce of proof that I ever had that life could be ideal. He was all things to me, and I wouldn't have given him up for every blonde co-ed on campus. I didn't realize that I already had.

Because Daniel didn't want to be the husband of a lesbian. He didn't want to have some idyllic alternative lifestyle set-up. And as he would point out to me later, those sorts of things were generally agreed on in advance.

"You signed on for a very traditional marriage, Tracey. That was what *you* wanted," he told me when he called to tell me that my divorce papers would be arriving. "And then you got bored. You can't just decide on your own that we're going to have some sort of alternative marriage. Those kinds of arrangements are made to suit the needs of both partners, not just one."

He was right. It was another symptom in the wanting-to-have-it-all syndrome. I was the one who cheated and I was the one who lied. I was the one who had an affair. I was the asshole. But it wasn't, as he supposed, because I was bored. I hadn't been bored actually. I had been totally fucking confused. All the things I thought I wanted were chimeras and all the things I actually wanted were totally taboo. Catholic school girls come to mind.

I spent a full six months of our separation in complete disbelief. But I got a house and a job and a dog and, for all appearances, moved on. My therapist complimented my resilience. My friends thought I was fine. My new girlfriend, the one with the vagina, she was young, but she knew better.

"You need space?" she asked. "Like to do what in?"

It was a good question, but I didn't know the answer. I thought maybe I would get back together with my husband. You know, because the whole lesbian derby girl thing was a little too cliché for me and I felt constricted. Because the stress of not being perfect was more stressful to me than the possibility that I might achieve perfection.

In one of our last conversations, Daniel had said to me, "I still believe in you."

And I was so relieved. Because I thought that I would die if someone didn't believe in me. And that someone had to be him, because he was just so *ideal*. And if someone who is pretty much perfect believes in you, then you can't be that bad, right?

The answer to that question is complicated. On the one hand, it is *yes*, I am that bad. On the other hand it is a question mark, an interrogation of that belief. Daniel's belief in me was based on his sincere faith that I *could* be ideal and believed in. And he wasn't being an asshole. Or if he was, he didn't know it. But he didn't know that I was starting to know that this whole idea of possibly being perfect was, in some inherent way, *assholic*.

Because the very real truth is that I am not perfect. I am gay. I am *not* going to be able to fit into the mainstream. I am *not* going to get to have my tattoos and my pretty pretty dresses and my young hot husband and my heterosexual privilege, too. I am going to have to make choices. And what I chose is blondes in basketball shorts and baby ducks and Baton Rouge. What I chose was not *ideal* in the socially acceptable sense of the term.

What I choose was in the context of roller derby. I chose a version of myself that fell down, that sometimes did not commit. That got hurt in very real ways that reverberate across my reality. I chose an edition of myself that is not fucking perfect. It's not even that cool. But it's real and it's resilient, and derby gives me a place to make that choice every single day if I need to. But it's a me that cannot be reduced to roller derby, even though it might be a product of exactly that thing.

My life now is not what others might consider ideal. I have a girlfriend that, despite our intense and loving commitment, I cannot marry. I don't wear dresses anymore. Not because I hate feminine fashion, but because I no longer feel any desire to please men. Frankly, the desires of men disgust me. I feel beautiful when I can knock a woman over who is twice my size, in fishnets and a lacey disposition. I feel beautiful dancing with Rock after hours of skating hard.

Men? In my sport, they are the referees.

Their job is to call the fouls and stay the fuck out of my way.

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**Vita**

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