

## **“The Story of ‘F’”**

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The environment around you is not one of depth and you are appreciated now for your image, not your essence.

She craved after a superficial life. She stalked it down as her prey, because such a life was the only lover she ever wanted, and she got him every time. Again and again. Repeatedly. In variations, not on a theme, but of her own self. Consumed again and again. Press repeat with her teeth and—voila! Every new catch becomes a mimic of what wasn't there.

A change in certain elements: her eye color, her sneakers, her work history, her circle of associates, a letter on her birth certificate, the oldest existing document of her fabulous life—even that was not sacrosanct. Give her a few simple household items and such authenticity in a document is changed and becomes as irrelevant as her.

She, by all accounts, prided herself on calling them as she saw them: people's financial, sexual, and ultimately neurotic motivations and how their strategies to get certain things show what hypocritical bastards they are in their more noble ideals which they never shared with her. In spite of this, she could tell they had them--stupid, pious, and unrealistic. It was the cut of their pants, the polish of their shoes, the twitch of their lip, their degree of hesitation when entering a room—explicit signs with implicit meanings that always gave them away. This is to say she had the cynic's love for detail.

Some might be inclined to say that it was such razor sharp intuition and ability to make split second decisions and judgments that informed her ostensible life. Or was it the other way around?

There was a story about her from about five years back, one she generated herself to a handful of people, a sort of urban legend. She had to create a back-story, a sort of automated memoir. How long did it take to create? About six hours on a clear bright

sunny day at the kitchen table of wherever she happened to be living at the time. Most likely in her apartment on Staten Island. Or maybe she had to sit at her latest boyfriend's kitchen table and seriously think this thing through, that is by not thinking at all and just letting it sit there on the surface of the paper, a good place to start. Maybe she couldn't sleep the night before.

It took her six hours to write her CV, her grant proposal, her mission statement, her letter of introduction. It did not require much planning, outlining, or source notes--in fact it required none. All it required to actually do was to sit down with a dull needle, a trace amount of ink toner and a droplet of water, and concentrate her efforts on a surface area the size of confetti on a letter-sized piece of paper. Sitting cross-legged in her late-twenties, she sat there looking at the document she had been carrying around her whole life. There was another official copy somewhere else in the world that could eventually rear its ugly head in the mind of the Department of Motor Vehicles. But really it was too late to think about that. Her dreams had been brought to the implementation level of schemes already. One forged document is as good as the next. One change, one letter, one difference no one was likely to find out or even care about. Changes as insignificant as one ant's footprints among those of a thousand others. Scrape by scrape, dot by dot, imprint by infinitesimal imprint, she was going to make the one letter go away and replace it with another. An identity everyone has on file somewhere, an identity so simplified there only exists the one letter or the other, a reduction, a crucible of ink, amassing to less than half a heartfelt teardrop. Male or Female. M or F.

She had already built up her undergraduate education by just telling people she went to Parsons to study commercial design. Whether it was true or not was irrelevant. In reality she opted to make money prostituting to earn enough to invest in computer and photography equipment and teach herself Visual Communication and Graphic Design. Student debt just wasn't a risk she was willing to take.

"So what's it like working for Mr. Wolfowitz?" She asked the young military cut man in a room on the eleventh floor at the Hotel Marriot in Fairfax, Virginia.

"He certainly likes to have his pencils sharpened." He told her. She didn't push it. Like so many of her clients who rely on their ability to keep secrets, give answers so inconsequential that really anyone outside the military, private cyber security firms, or the Department of Transportation thinks that, despite or maybe because of his security clearance in Washington, he has got to be the dumbest piece of shit for not being so free in what he says. So he thinks. And like so many of her clients, he was a cross-dresser, particularly drawn to cheap 99-cent store red lace g-strings made in China.

She lay on the bed smoking a cigarette while he walked back and forth posing in front of the dust-free mirror above the hotel dresser nobody ever bothered to put anything into, not even a Bible.

It was different in Washington than New York. Here, paying for sex was just a pretext, a pretense, a false dirty little secret, a red haring. What they really wanted was to act out that fantasy of being that innocent girl in the trailer park, herself in turn acting out that fantasy of being out there in the big bad world with the big bad Wolfowitz, himself somewhere in a non-pedestrian friendly suburb dressed up in grandma's night gown and gaudy lipstick. Sometimes it seemed the shame came more from hiring a shaman for such cleansings of the spirit than wanting to be fucked up the ass.

"I look good right?"

"Sure."

Another \$800 that weekend minus expenses and she could buy a replacement macro lens she will use only twice.

She sat there alone looking at the slight sheen on the veneer of the toner. You could pretty much guess that what got passed to her as an official copy was not an original one. The black and the white bumped up against each other too much and exaggerated the smallest unintended and inconsequential markings—the three pieces of lint in the upper left hand corner from the polyester blend sweater of the little old gnome lady her mother saw out of the corner of her eye through a half opened door on the way out of the maternity ward, some fleck of a biodegradable substance circa 1978. Did they even use photocopiers in the late 70s? No matter what the state of originality it had, its authenticity was king. Authenticity came from approval. Approval came from authority. Authority came from...whatever.

Maybe later when she told a couple of friends about it, she really wasn't looking to spread her own rumor. It's just that no one lives in a vacuum. No one lives in the perfect state of what either official papers or their own deluded fantasies say.

There was Alexia. Alexandra. Alex. Alexandria. Al. Kate. Blondie. Smoke-in-her-Face. Got her passport picture taken with no make-up and that look of apathy in her visage, like a hardened criminal so that when she went through airport security no one

would really care what gender she was or if she was carrying a gun. One-way ticket to Barcelona with one carry-on. She just filled out the form, checking the box marked “F” and the lady behind the counter at the Social Security office never even bothered to see past her face that looked like any other face. Female it is! And on her permanent record, too.

It was a question of getting the letter on the form to look like it had gone through the same amount of degradations, to look like it was immersed into the complete history. Like Alexia, she, too, was dependent on the benumbed synapses of a bureaucrat. One sharp eye of one keen observer locked away in an archive for twenty years, away from a contextual world to observe, and a love for catching inconsistencies then it’s all over. A crease running through the middle of the letter like the partitioning of its body is a good touch, another element, another theme, another...whatever. Do it too much, turning it into a disheveled tattered rose of your birth and you have to end up constructing other elements towards another identity different from the one you originally intended. Even if only for one drizzly spring afternoon in a government waiting room you will easily forget, apart from the time it took away from enjoying a maudlin day at home. One more excessive crease in the document will force you to create an incognito creased fashion ensemble of someone a few rungs down on the economic ladder from where you are trying to place yourself through lies and deceit.

This was the scene of her work. It did not take place in any office, factory or storefront. It didn’t even take place in the kitchen she was at now with the tools of the trade she was trying so hard to scheme her way into. Her understanding of the graphic world had not come about as craft or even a passion for the trade, but as an identity with it irrelevant to any legitimacy to the claim. It was a true insight of hers into identity as such. Identification didn’t really mean anything if it weren’t constantly fucked with. What did identity matter to a person—to others or to oneself—unless it was precarious, easily lost, stolen or confused for something else? It took place in bed with her string of boyfriends, swearing that the issue was that she was intersexed, not that she was a man in woman’s clothing, telling them about her childhood traumas growing up with both sets of genitals of one form or another, changing the story of their internal and external position or domination from lover to lover, just to keep her fabrication skills fresh and ready. Even after having sex they apparently believed her. She got them to financially support her to live beyond her means, working on the side in a string of hotels up and down the East Coast.

And although the only real way she was ever to make any money was in hotels, providing the biggest clichéd scenery to the life of a transsexual, or grifter, or marginalized art world hanger-on and the closeted homosexuals she serviced, such spaces collapsed in their easily recognizable beige bed spreads, framed watercolors of

tulips, dimmer switches, and the same wing back chairs found in a law office cross-town. They provided a place non-descript enough to not pay attention to anything other than how non-descript it was, so that when she set up shop in Florida, it was just as good as Virginia as New York. Clients could even mentally associate the anonymity of the sex with the room's utter lack of lived-in individuality or personal choices. After the act when feelings of guilt or regret about the very expensive anti-climatic scene he could walk away with the comforting assurance that some industrial strength interior decorator ten years ago somewhere made the curtains match the drapes.

The thing about clichés that she knew for absolute certain was that the reason why people returned to them over and over again was not a matter of laziness or inability to figure things about for oneself, but, by means of reduction and repetition, one's choices became limited allowing less room for risks, providing a comfort zone based on averages.

But for her it was the limitations, the clichés of gender that allowed her to find all the nuances between two dichotomies of appearance. There were many elements to work with to make an infinite or myriad number of choices in how one matched up to the stacked choice of gender. And it was a choice really in her mind, a question of will, of whim and not some bullshit reasoning of being a woman trapped inside of a man's body beyond the realm of preference trapped in the world of psycho-biology, because really she was a self-determinist trapped inside a pre-fabricated hotel room with a predestined birth certificate.

Of course changing gender, both its appearance and sexual function is a choice stupid!

And feeling as such? Is that a choice?

How many times in your life have you chosen to be angry, girl? And how often did you do so because you knew it would make you happy? Well sometimes you have to transform yourself, deliberately and with intent into a woman so you can be more of a man, more human.

The imported beer sitting there next to her in her boyfriend's kitchen started to sweat with perspiration, barely getting touched at nine in the morning. A letter is not a gender. It's not even a symbol of a gender. It doesn't necessarily point to or indicate one. Even being under a banner or in a box on a piece of paper doesn't transform it as

long as she concentrates all her efforts on the letter, or that is, blocks out all the other words on the form that she does not wish to change. The transformed and transforming letter will not move beyond its place on the certificate, just as a remodeled kitchen, a renovated apartment building, a gentrified neighborhood, a renewed city will never be such beyond their own defined borders drawn up before reconstruction. She was pretty sure her boyfriend was paying triple what the rent was for the previous owners, just for the luxury to have clean straight lines defining every room to remind him of the suburban home he run far away from. No one drinks imported beer outside such reconfigured urban spaces.

Does one choose to drink imported beer or is she a Belgian trapped in an American body?

She began scrapping the right side of the “M” abandoning the left just to have something new to do, a new area of concentration, a new direction, a new something that is more of the same. I am a left-handed person trapped in a right-handed person’s body. A left hand operated from the right side of the brain. Have to become angry in order to be happy. Have to get rid of the M in order to get rid of the significance of the F.

There was that one client last week who walked into the room real serious like he was early in his high-stakes career doing...whatever. He looked as if he kinda knew how to wear a suit without having had much practice, as if he might start smoking cigarillos in five years time. His head was shaved so close to his head, you couldn’t tell if he was doing so to cover up the fact that he was loosing his hair, shiny olive skin of some sort of Mediterranean extraction, a man for all his attention to his own looks to be the object of desire for women everywhere, carried a seriousness about him. In other words, wanting to be successful at whatever it was he did professionally as the wellspring for anything that might be called genuine happiness left him completely wound up and in capable of being happy. He brought out the ropes, the black bra, the Max Factor travel make-up kit. She tied him to the bedpost on the floor, strapped the bra to his bald head like he requested and smeared the purple lipstick over his mouth and lit his cheeks up with a pale pink meant more for a Scandinavian ice queen with as much machismo aggression as he seemed to want. Sometimes you have to become a woman in order to become a man. He cleaned up in the bathroom and they both went down to the hotel bar to play act like they were a couple on their first date, as non-descript and upwardly mobile as the bar stools they sat on.

Remember girl, realness is blending in so well that no one even guesses you to be anything different than what you appear to be, so look like everyone else and you'll be fine.

Even though she was taking great care to not tear up the paper itself, leaning into it with enough force to be gentle and wispy with the needle to make its effect and damage ability on the world about the equivalent of a brush made of rabbit fur, the repetition of her passings over the toner were starting to wear on the standard copy paper. Little microscopic strands of pulp started to show an inconsistency with the rest of the paper, an inconsistency that she could objectively say was something only she, as the forger, could take notice of. Yet with this half way assessment, she was aware of what bigger problems this could balloon into if she kept up the pace she was going at —rabbit fur needles and all—it was bound to catch even the unsuspecting eye.

But then was she being a tad bit paranoid? She wasn't as fearful of getting caught as Alexia was. Almost in spite of rather than because of her recklessness in such matters, Alexia was much more insecure about being spooked. Alexia was definitely the more insecure one, despite her brash risky actions, whereas our self-proclaimed commercial designer liked to keep a much tighter ship in technical or legal matters.

Over the years she developed a way of making her fib about attending art school the type of lie that had very few consequences as she fiddled around with whatever new design software from the Internet bubble that just came out. First it was to clients as a sort of set of laboratory tests on a species that thrives on lies. Then she moved on to potential friends at bars and parties where she barely knew anyone, feeling her way into the interest of anyone who remotely appeared to be in advertising or fashion photography or web design or...whatever.

She finally made the big leap becoming the receptionist for a high-end specialist fashion magazine in Soho. She bought a couple of books on Mario Testino, the magazine's predominant photographer and was quick to figure out the magazine's interest in him. He was a frequent photographer of Madonna, which saved her many investigative hours trying to figure out their aesthetic motivations, not that being hired for one's modelesque looks to answer the phone meant that she really needed to share the company's interests. Her coke-addled body and vacuous smile just had to match the grand empty streamlined iron-beamed gallery space she sat in all day, beautiful because she really didn't care if she had an honest opinion about what went into the magazine. And serenely empty because she never offered up anything concerning the passport they withheld from the unpaid Japanese intern that worked 16 hour days.

Yes, besides the blown up to life-sized photography parading the gallery, it was one of those uses of Manhattan real estate that followed the city's marketing strategies of minimalism—the less the space owned was occupied or used for anything to turn a profit, the higher the value.

It was a space as white and void as the area on the paper where an “M” used to be.

Next she brought out the cuticle pusher to burnish the paper down to a clean flat surface, putting what was left of her testosterone-influenced upper body to push and rub the paper flat. Still this required a controlled and concentrated use of power. There wasn't much to it. It was more of a way to mark the halfway point. Three hours down, three hours to go.

“You see these walls? You see how clean they are? If you don't give me my money back now, these walls are going to be dripping with your blood.” She very calmly put the money back down on the coffee table between them, closed her purse, turned around and left the man's apartment without saying a word and headed back to the escort agency and handed them their share of the money out of her own pocket without saying a word about what just happened or explaining why she was back so early. This was right before escort agencies started to really loose out to eros.com and sex workers going independent via the Internet. Pretty soon there was going to be no one left to make money for fat middle-aged Jewish men from the surrounding Washington suburbs. It was hard to figured out why she worked at an agency at the time. She had always been an independent, in almost everything I guess.

She only lasted a week after the incident and went back to sharing a townhouse with other girls in the suburbs of Fairfax, Virginia for in calls. It was just like the hotel rooms, same furniture, same beige walls, the only difference being the fact that the front room was complete with a clean, non-descript bed and Matisse prints of lounging women, while they kept the backrooms—kitchen, bathroom and two official bedrooms where they actually lived—in a constant state of looking like a college student dormitory with some sort of abject ghetto sleeping arrangement of two girls to a room on the floor, flush with a plasma TV with too many channels and garishly colorful presence on the beige wall and left empty take-out containers everywhere. Most of it was due to the drug habits of two of the other girls and her own laziness. By this point she had given up any drug life except hard liquor, which she drank in abundance during dry spells with clients making her more sarcastic and bitter to the other girls in the vicinity of the two bedrooms they shared like illegal immigrants.



Well we both as groups have to forge our official documents, don't we? Might as well have the same lifestyle or living arrangements.

She got the right amount of sheen down and squeezed a couple of drops of ink into the bottle cap of her beer, adding enough water so that she could work out a faint outline of the "F." American Typewriter Light or Courier? She just copied the "F" in the word "Father" four rows down.

Her favorite type of picture to take was either herself or whatever lover she had at the time in perfect repose in a perfect light void of any clues as to where the picture was taken. It was more from their faces as individuals (she rarely photographed herself together with any of them) that I could conclude that they were somehow in a domestic situation, no matter where they might have been physically. Maybe it was the kind of trusting expressions on their faces that had led me to this conclusion. It was never clear to me whether such serenity was pure and unposed or not. Was it for the benefit of their friends and colleagues to not worry about the fragility of their relationship? Besides the one boyfriend she was with for almost ten years after meeting online, all the secondary men in her life never lasted more than three or four months tops, and still they all posed for her as confident and content angels caught in the light of an afternoon sun, as if coming into their own, even if their partner is outside the frame and ultimately a transient fling of a person.

Photography really wasn't a medium for catching an image of true vulnerability—whatever that means. It was not a truth revealer, but a truth creator. Identity was not ever anything one discovered about oneself or anyone else or the world at large...or whatever, by simply clicking a shutter. You pressed a button and went vigorously into Photoshop and worked the shit out of that thing. You took pictures of beautiful young men in rooms with beige walls and posted them on your Internet photo blog that fellow photographer friends perused through for distraction while unemployed.

You needed to believe the lie as long as possible, no matter how long the lie lasted.

Like a Seurat painting using the one color he forbid himself to use in his paintings, the color Mick Jagger wanted to paint everything, the color that isn't a color, she built up the letter "F" one dot at a time. Going into the second hour of its creation, it began to feel like erecting a building taking into consideration the stability of its steel frame and the flushness of its external structure. The more her eyes focused on the letter the less she had a sense of its actual size. Scale was something she became concerned about in terms of the letter itself. It could be a monolith, a crow, an ant, the Earth

itself blocking the sun. On a clean well-lit piece of paper, the letter could be any form any size anywhere in the world. It was a pre-given entity anyway and so somehow not really defined in any real nuanced sense. It was just a small, dumb, rarely noticed, seen or glanced at letter of the alphabet. One lonely F.

It really can be so easy to feel sorry for her to be so marginalized as a transsexual or for her to go on living such a precarious existence just so she could someday somehow enter the upper middle class, but really it was such an existence that gave her that confidence to invent herself, her appearance, her social class, her profession, and yes eventually her own genitals, even if such self-invention could never go beyond the level of fantasy as if that were the only way to help insure or perhaps prolong the life of a dream that really died a long time ago around the time she should have applied to art school and somehow flaked out and decided to half-ass fake her way through the fantasy. Maybe having an education or being nouveau riche for its own sake was not the real issue but perhaps because she was not totally conscious of the fantasy factor of whatever lie she told, she ended up lying to herself more than anyone else about where she was and what it actually was that she did in or for this world, but at least her birth certificate could finally affirm her own understanding about herself, even if the effects of such affirmation had little consequence on her life.