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I am Queer, and not a lot of people know that. I was raised Roman Catholic, growing up in a town that didn't pride itself on being queer-friendly. For years I struggled with self-acceptance; especially when I met a man and fell in love and married him, after years of proclaiming myself a lesbian.

But I was given the opportunity I will never forget, and it began with Linda Stein's exhibition, *The Fluidity of Gender*. I was helping the museum curator unpack the crates holding the body suits and I could not believe how connected I felt to what this artist was saying: the continuum between masculinity and femininity, being true to your own authenticity, and the courage that art brings out in oneself.

I was inspired.

After Stein's artist talk and reception, I joined a local poet and dancer and gave a reading on being a Queer woman and what that meant for me. My coworker lent me her strength standing next to me wearing a Wonder Woman Stein sculpture, my husband cheered me on from the audience, and my mother sat next to him, smiling as I hadn't seen her smile in years.

I didn't realize how hard this reading would be for me, nor how liberating. This experience changed me, and I will remember it for the rest of my life.

[Performance Transcript]

### **Me and My Label-Maker**

I am queer. And I have a husband. That might be confusing. But really, it isn't. This is just who I am.

I grew up in Helena. I love it here. There is something special about this place. We have our own little universe here. We are protected from a lot of outside forces. Some things just aren't the same here as they are in the rest of the world.

And sometimes that can be stifling. That was how I felt, growing up gay in this town.

There is something so suffocating about living in a place where you look around and you see the people next to you, your classmates, your neighbors, the people you meet in the grocery store and downtown, and the same woman who makes your coffee every day and who knows your name and you know hers, and you see, and you know, that you are not like them. Only you can see that. Only you know that it is there.

But you can't go around telling anyone that you are different. This isn't that kind of town. I didn't know anyone who was gay when I was growing up. My parents and I never really talked about it; my family never expressed anti-gay thoughts or feelings or anything like that. We just didn't talk about it.

You just weren't gay in this town. That was how it was. You had to keep that stuff locked up, keep those thoughts inside. Shove it deeper. You'll be fine. Just keep on a tight lid.

And I did. I made it through high school and no one knew my secret. No one, that is, that I didn't want to know. I carefully curated my secret-keepers. Self-preservation dictated I do so. I was so afraid that if someone found out I had a girlfriend, for a total of three months my freshman year, that I would be ostracized. Or worse, not taken seriously. People don't take bisexuals seriously even today, 9 years later. But a fifteen-year-old who was questioning her sexuality? It was almost a cliché.

I felt afraid to tell people I was, whatever I was, not quite straight, not quite gay, so I guess bisexual? I was afraid if I was to start going around telling people beyond my close circle of friends that I had adopted this label, bisexual, that I wouldn't be able to live up to it. And that it was bad. I didn't know.

I thought so, because otherwise why wouldn't more people be like me? Why didn't I hear about more people who were bisexual or gay or queer of any kind? It must be bad

It was only after leaving Helena for university that I started to explore what being queer meant to me.

Missoula was an entirely different world from Helena. I found something in Missoula--I found a voice that before had been quiet. It was suddenly safe to talk about these things. To talk about being gay. To admit to it, to own up to it, and, eventually, to embrace it.

I came out in college. As much as I was able to, at least. I worked my way up steadily through siblings and peers and professors to the day, summer after my freshman year of college, I introduced my parents to my girlfriend.

And, like you'd expect, it really wasn't that big of a deal. My father smiled and said he'd known all along, but, if you knew my father, you would understand that was just something he would say. My mom was much more cool.

Now, this reading is supposed to be about finding my power, right? I bet you expect me to finish up there, to say "and that's how I found my power! Yay!". But that's not the rest of the story.

I actually felt like I lost a little power that day I told my parents I was a lesbian. I felt diminished with the release of this huge secret I had kept tucked in for so long. I felt hollow. Gay, but hollow.

I spent the next two years at university as a lesbian. That was how I identified. I was much more open to my peers, I delved into an independent study on Queer Literature, I wrote a thesis on queer stereotypes, I held hands with women on campus, I did everything I could to own this title I thought I wanted.

I tried too hard to be a good lesbian. I tried to buy clothes that would make me look gayer. I slipped this identity, this "defining characteristic" into conversations with people I had just met. I wanted everyone

to know that I was different and I was okay with it. This is part of who I am, recognize it, please, listen to me, I am telling you something important. This is me. I fought tooth and nail for my place in the queer community. I had ignored it for so long, hidden it away, and now I needed it out, I needed it out for the world to see and hear and know.

And then one day I didn't want that anymore. I wanted to take it all back. I had met a man and I thought he was great.

This man I had met—he was great. We hit it off. We connected on all levels, even romantically. I decided to keep him around. He decided I was worth it, too. So for the first time in three years, I had a boyfriend.

And some people just couldn't grasp that. Including myself.

This was my third and final year of university. I didn't stick around in my college town. About two weeks after I graduated, I moved out. Back to the town I grew up in. Back here.

As I went into whirlwind mode, finishing my two theses, rounding up the last essays and projects, planning and re-planning my graduation outfit and practicing walking in my shoes, I also geared myself up to return. To go back to Helena. With a boyfriend.

That felt, odd as it is to say, like I was doing something wrong. I still couldn't shake this idea that I had let someone down. Not myself, I didn't think, but someone else. A proverbial "someone else". Like, as I had so often heard secondhand from queer sources, like I had betrayed the queer community. A little more of my power ebbed out as that thought struck me. I was a betrayer. A backtracker. All because I had a boyfriend.

I tried to comfort myself, bring myself back to reality.

This is ridiculous. I am happy. I don't need to answer to anyone. There is no cosmic law against what I am doing. It isn't called LGBTQ for anything, right? This is fine. This feels right. It feels good. I mean, I am think I love this guy?

I did love this guy. So much, in fact, that we got engaged. But as I went spouting the great news, this exciting news, I felt, more than once, moments where I thought my stomach was going to come up out of my mouth. Moments of whisper, of hush and silence that all of the sudden were punctuated with the worst, most mortifying thing I could think of, spoken out loud. "That's great! But, wait...aren't you gay?"

I wanted to punch something. Or cry. It was kind of a rollercoaster, really. I am not sure what I said in response. I'm not sure how I defended myself. I don't really remember. I just remember being hurt. At my least powerful.

I didn't know who I was. I wasn't gay but now I couldn't be straight. It was high school all over again. Was I bi? I hated that label. I didn't know.

I had to start taking my power back. By forgiving myself. By accepting myself. And that was the hardest part.

I knew I liked girls my freshman year of high school. I met a special one. She opened a new window, a new escape from our closed off little town. She was beautiful and smart and funny and kind and we went to Winter Formal together at her school and danced together and didn't care who saw us. But then I broke up with her. I wasn't ready to take the leap out the window she held open. I never told my family. She said she understood. I never stopped regretting breaking up. She says she understands. We still keep in touch.

In college, I declared myself a lesbian. I worked at that stifling label for three years and I thought at times it would be my salvation and my doom.

That broke down when I met the man in that chair over there, that man who said, upon hearing that I hadn't dated men for three years, "Oh. Ok. Well, that's alright." That was also his response to me telling him I was still in love with my first girlfriend.

Sexuality is not an easy subject. It has caused me the most grief and pain of anything the last 9 years. It has brought me to my most powerless points.

And also my most powerful. Once I chose to embrace it. Embrace my feelings, whatever and for whomever they might be. Once I stopped forcing it, forcing myself into a box, a checkbox that could categorize and encompass me and somehow, through that, make me happy?

I found my power when I needed it most, at my lowest point. And I keep finding it, over and over again, buried sometimes deeper in me than others, but always still there, inside. There is a fire of power burning within me. It just needs relighting once in a while.

Thank you.