

THE
57
BUS

DASHKA SLATER

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For Cliff

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a true story. All the people in this book are real, although in some cases pseudonyms or initials were used. Young people are identified by first name only.

The details of the story were pieced together from a variety of sources, including interviews, documents, letters, videos, diaries, social media posts, and public records. Quotes from these sources are verbatim except in a few cases where I removed last names, replacing them with long dashes. Information from firsthand accounts was corroborated with official records wherever possible, unless those records were sealed or are not available to the public. In those cases, I relied on the memory of witnesses and participants.

The pronouns and names used for gender-nonconforming people were approved by the people in question.

THE 57 BUS

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 4, 2013

By four-thirty in the afternoon, the first mad rush of after-school passengers has come and gone. What's left are stragglers and stay-laters, swiping their bus passes as they climb onto the 57 bus and take seats among the coming-home workers, the shoppers and errand-doers, the other students from high schools and middle schools around the city. The bus is loud but not as loud as sometimes. A few clusters of kids are shouting and laughing and an older woman at the front keeps talking to the driver.

Dark is coming on. Daylight savings ended yesterday, and now evening rushes into the place where afternoon used to be. Everything is duskier, sleepier, wintrier now. Passengers look at their phones or stare through the scratched and grimy windows at the waning light.

Sasha sits near the back. For much of the journey, the teenager

has been reading a paperback copy of *Anna Karenina* for a class in Russian literature. Today, like most days, Sasha wears a T-shirt, a black fleece jacket, a gray flat cap, and a gauzy white skirt. A senior at a small private high school, the teenager identifies as agender—neither male nor female. As the bus lumbers through town, Sasha puts down the book and drifts into sleep, skirt draped over the edge of the seat.

A few feet away, three teenage boys are laughing and joking. One of them, Richard, wears a black hoodie and an orange-billed New York Knicks hat. A sixteen-year-old junior at Oakland High School, he's got hazel eyes and a slow, sweet grin. He stands with his back to Sasha, gripping a pole for balance.

Sasha sleeps as Richard and his companions goof around, play fighting. Sleeps as Richard's cousin Lloyd bounds up and down the aisle flirting with a girl up front. Sleeps as Richard surreptitiously flicks a lighter and touches it to the hem of that gauzy white skirt.

Wait.

In a moment, Sasha will wake inside a ball of flame and begin to scream.

In a moment, everything will be set in motion.

Taken by ambulance to a San Francisco burn unit, Sasha will spend the next three and a half weeks undergoing multiple surgeries to treat second- and third-degree burns running from calf to thigh.

Arrested at school the following day, Richard will be charged with two felonies, each with a hate-crime clause that will add time to his sentence if he is convicted. Citing the severity of the crime, the district attorney will charge him as an adult, stripping him of the

protections normally given to juveniles. Before the week is out, he will be facing the possibility of life imprisonment.

But none of that has happened yet. For now, both teenagers are just taking the bus home from school.

Surely it's not too late to stop things from going wrong. There must be some way to wake Sasha. Divert Richard. Get the driver to stop the bus.

There must be something you can do.

OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA

Oakland, California, is a city of more than 400,000 people, but it can still feel like a small town. Not small geographically, of course. The city sprawls across seventy-eight square miles, stretching from the shallow, salty estuary at the edge of San Francisco Bay to the undulating green-and-gold hills where bobcats and coyotes roam. What makes it feel small is the web of connections, the way people's stories tangle together. Our lives make footprints, tracks in the snows of time. People know each other's parents or siblings, their aunts and cousins. They go to school together, or worship together. They play sports on the same team, or work in the same building. The tracks cross. The stories overlap.

Oakland is considered one of the most diverse cities in the country. It's Asian and Latino, black and white, African, Arab, Indian, Iranian, Native American, and Pacific Islander. No one group is a

majority. It has more lesbian couples per capita than any city in the nation, and one of the largest proportions of gay- and lesbian-headed households. It's a city that prides itself on its open-mindedness, its lack of pretension, and its homegrown slang. (Oaklanders say *hella* when they mean *very*—and *hecka* when they want to be polite about it.)

But for all its laid-back inclusiveness, Oakland is also a city of stark contrasts. In 2013, the year Sasha was burned, Oakland ranked seventh among American cities in income inequality—just below New York. Its per capita rate of violent crime made it the second most dangerous city in America, but its citizens still paid some of the highest rents in the country.

Gravity works backward here—the money flows uphill. The wealthier neighborhoods in the hills boast good schools, low crime, and views of the bay. Thanks to the Bay Area's high-tech boom, long-vacant historic buildings downtown are filling with startups, boutiques peddling handmade jeans, and nightspots serving seven-ingredient cocktails. But little of this good fortune spilled over into the flatlands of East Oakland, where Richard lived. This is where the bulk of the city's murders happen—two-thirds of them, in 2013. The schools are shabbier here; the test scores are lower. There's more trash on the streets, more roaming dogs, more liquor stores, fewer grocery stores. The median strips are ragged with weeds.

The 57 bus travels through both kinds of neighborhoods, traversing an eleven-mile path from one end of the city to the other. It begins at the northwest corner of Oakland and lumbers diagonally through the city, crossing the middle-class foothills where Sasha

lived and where Richard went to school, and then chugging along MacArthur Boulevard for 120 blocks. The route terminates at the city's southeast border, close to Richard's house. Each afternoon, the two teenagers' journeys overlapped for a mere eight minutes. If it hadn't been for the 57 bus, their paths might never have crossed at all.

PART 1

SASHA

TUMBLING

(Adapted from Sasha's Tumblr page)

Favorite vegetable: bok choy

Favorite animals: cat and cuttlefish

Favorite type of movie: dream sequences

Three best qualities?

Navigation

My friends seem to like me

Purple

Of course I like hats

anyone who doesn't is wrong

I like compliments

I dislike compliments

I like my hair

I give good hugs

I'm good at finding potential puns.

If the whole world was listening, I might just
rant about a bunch of things like gender
wealth inequality
why school is important

I like parties

I dislike parties

I don't really keep track of disappointments.

Ideal vacation spot: prob'ly a city with a nice subway

Thinking of things to get me? Try this:

A brass airship

A transit map shower curtain

A medieval cloak

A corset with silver buttons

A chiseled chunk of gallium that melts in your palm

A dress swirled with the image of a nebula

A Victorian house on wheels

Tights painted like a mermaid tail

PRONOUNS

Even as a toddler, Sasha was interested in language. Not in learning Italian or Swahili or Mandarin, but in language itself, its shape and structure, the Lego blocks of sounds that snap together to make words and sentences. Most toddlers are interested in the fact that the animal with two pointy ears and a long tail is called a *cat*. Sasha was interested in the fact that adding an *s* at the end of the word *cat* made it plural. “Look,” Sasha would say. “Two cat . . . sssss.”

Before turning three, Sasha was matching sounds with letters—sometimes in unusual ways. “*B* is for *baby*!” Sasha would exclaim. “*Y* is for *wire*! *Ten* is for *tent*!”

At four, Sasha was reading independently, but had also begun contemplating the shapes of letters. “*K* is one rectangle and two parallelograms,” Sasha announced at the breakfast table one day. “*M* is two parallelograms and two rectangles.”

Two years later, Sasha began creating a new language. It was called Astrolinguish and it was the language of Sasha's home planet, Astrolingua. Written Astrolinguish was awash in diacritical marks, with lots of umlauts, accents, and tildes. The spoken language luxuriated in rolled *r*'s and *l*'s.

As a senior in high school, Sasha was still inventing languages, hanging out online with other “conlangers”—people who construct languages of their own. By now Sasha was working up a new language. This one never had a name, but it was spoken by the members of an imaginary agricultural society something like that of ancient Mesopotamia.

All languages embody the obsessions of the people who speak them, and so Sasha's language was meant to reflect the interests of a people whose world was dominated by growing seasons, grains, and harvests. Instead of pronouns that distinguished between male and female, Sasha's language had pronouns that distinguished between animate and inanimate objects. The word for *sun* was *jez*, which was also the word for *day*. The difference was that *sun* was considered animate, a being, and *day* was considered inanimate, a thing.

Our language, English, works differently. We care a lot about gender, and English reflects that in its pronouns—*she* or *he*, *her* or *him*, *hers* or *his*. You might think this is just how languages work in the real world, but there are many languages on earth that are basically gender neutral, using the same word for *he*, *she*, and *it*, or not using pronouns at all. You've probably heard of some of them. They include: Armenian, Comanche, Finnish, Hungarian, Hindi, Indonesian, Quechua, Thai, Tagalog, Turkish, Vietnamese, and Yoruba.

English, on the other hand, poses a challenge for people like Sasha who don't see themselves as fitting into neat either/or categories like male or female. Sasha, like many gender-nonconforming people, wants to be referred to with the pronoun *they*. It might feel awkward at first, but you'll get used to it.

1001 BLANK WHITE CARDS

For their sixteenth birthday, Sasha asked for an accordion, a manual typewriter, a Soviet flag, and a new Rubik's Cube. They didn't know how to play the accordion, but they might have learned if they had received one, which they didn't. They didn't get the flag either, although Sasha and their friend Michael made a cardboard hammer and sickle not long afterward and hung it on Sasha's bedroom wall. At the time, they were obsessed with everything having to do with Russia and communism. Their friend Carrie, who took the bus with Sasha that year, remembers Sasha going on and on about it during the bus ride home from school.

“Sasha, once you get to know them, is very outspoken about things,” she explains.

That's once you get to know them. When you first meet Sasha, they're quiet and shy. They have chin-length, wavy brown hair, a

pale, round face, and thick, dark eyebrows. When they smile, their eyes crinkle into slits. They wear glasses, round owlsh ones, and they don't always look at you straight on. As a child they were diagnosed with Asperger's, a form of autism, which can make them awkward socially. But it also makes them passionate about their interests, and the passion eventually trumps the shyness.

What was Sasha passionate about when they were a senior in high school? "Buses, cartoons, and the color purple," says Healy, one of Sasha's closest friends. To that you could add communism, games, the web comic *Homestuck*, and live-action role-playing, or larping. Also the ska-pop-punk band Sarchasm, which was formed by some kids at Maybeck High School and had once proclaimed Sasha their biggest fan. And veganism, although Sasha disliked the way other vegans on the Internet made such a huge deal about it.

Sasha's best friend was Michael, a tall, gangly kid with sandy-blond hair and thick glasses who always wore a gray beanie and a green army jacket. Michael and Sasha had been pretty much inseparable since freshman year, when they met while playing the board game Diplomacy. Over time, they formed the nucleus of a tight circle of friends: Sasha, Healy, Michael, Michael's girlfriend, Teah, and another friend named Ian. Ian, blond, bearded, with a habit of tucking his chin and looking up at you from under his eyebrows, was the one who never stopped talking. Red-haired Healy was the unquellable fountain of excitement who stole people's hats and wore her emotions on her sleeve. Cherub-faced Teah loved costumes and dancing—she and Michael were so close that their friends referred to them as a single person named Tichael. When the two got too

cuddly, Sasha would get between them and shout, “Leave room for Jesus!” at the top of their lungs, like the chaperone at a Christian prom.

Sasha was the brilliant one, the one who blazed through calculus, linguistics, physics, and computer programming with a kind of effortlessness. Not that any of them were slouches when it came to academics. Kids who weren’t into school were unlikely to choose Maybeck, a private high school with roughly a hundred kids that rented space on two floors of a Presbyterian church in Berkeley. In the tiny classrooms, students gathered around conference tables and critiqued the concept of America as a shining city on a hill, or compared the writings of Charles Darwin and Ursula K. Le Guin.

Teachers liked to claim that Maybeck didn’t have cliques like other high schools, and it was true that the place was a refuge for kids like Healy who had been bullied in middle school. People were nice to each other at Maybeck, accepting. But the school still had social groupings, just like any other high school—arty kids, stoners, bros.

“We were the nerdy kids,” Ian says. “The funny, sort of crazy, nerdy people who played video games and watched anime and read manga.”

All of them were fascinated by games—board games, video games, card games, role-playing games, trading-card games. At lunch and after school they often gathered at a wooden table in the hallway that people called the hex table, even though, as Ian pointed out, it was an octagon, not a hexagon. There they played cards, particularly a game Michael and Sasha had learned from a

couple of seniors when they were freshmen. It was officially called 1001 Blank White Cards, although they mostly just called it Index Cards.

“It’s a game played with index cards,” Sasha explains. “Not all of which are white and at this point very few of which are blank.” The deck grew over time, with people pilfering index cards from classrooms whenever they wanted to expand it. If you drew a blank card from the deck, that meant you could fill it in, assigning it a point value and an effect, the more random the better. Over time, the deck filled up with in-jokes.

There was a card featuring a drawing of *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway that resulted in the player losing two turns *as you read the book and are bored to death*. There was a card that required you to talk in a Russian accent, a card that required you to lisp, and a card that required you to lisp while talking in a Russian accent. There were cards that required you to play an air guitar solo, speak like an English-dubbed anime character, eat leaves like a giraffe, engage in staring contests, and end every sentence with the word *dawg*. There was a card called Tower of Hats that required you to take everyone else’s hats and wear them in a stack. There was a card that said *Game over, Ian wins!* that had been created as a birthday present for Ian. Sasha created a card called A Complete History of the Soviet Union as Told by a Humble Worker, Arranged to the Melody of Tetris, which was the name of a six-and-a-half-minute song by an obscure British comedy band called Pig with the Face of a Boy. Michael and Sasha were both obsessed with the song and sang it at every opportunity. “The effect of the card is that you have to sing the song or lose a turn,” Sasha explains.

Aside from Ian's birthday card, there was no way to win the game, and no real goal. They just played until people had to go home. By graduation, the stack of index cards was about two feet high and had to be carried in a special bag. But at the beginning, most of those 1001 white cards were blank. Back then, Sasha was called Luke and they were referred to as *he*.

LUKE AND SAMANTHA

In middle school, Sasha was brainy, shy, and introverted, the kind of kid who is easy to overlook. Sasha's father, Karl, refers to that quality as Sasha's "invisibility cloak." "They blend into the background," he explains. "They've always been that sort of kid, that nobody even knows they're there."

Sasha didn't seem to need other people much; in fact, they often said that the world would be better off without humans in it at all. The world inside their head was fascinating enough. They thought about numbers a lot, and shapes, and the size of the universe. They drew imaginary subway maps and worked out math problems on a whiteboard the family kept in the breakfast nook. They were interested in space and Legos and trains and the ancient Greeks and they noticed things most people didn't, like the subtle shades within the green of a leaf, or the geometric shapes within a sculpture. They

loved cats and had a habit of meowing. Sasha couldn't say whether any of this was because they had Asperger's, because, of course, they'd never *not* had Asperger's. The only mind they'd ever been inside was their own.

In sixth grade, Sasha started attending a tiny K-to-eight Montessori school with about twenty-five kids in each grade. They were in a mixed-age class of fourth, fifth, and sixth graders and there was just one other new kid that year, an apple-cheeked fifth grader named Samantha. She looked right past Sasha's invisibility cloak and saw a kindred spirit.

Samantha was a head taller than Sasha, with tousled blond hair, ivory skin that flushed easily, and wire-rimmed glasses. Her family moved around a lot, and at ten she'd already lived in five states and attended six different elementary schools. But she had never had a best friend. She was used to being an outcast, to feeling both smarter than other kids, and stupider. Her dad was a nanotechnologist whose laboratory was in their basement. He'd been giving her what he called "Dad Homework" for her whole life and she'd always gotten pleasure from demonstrating her intelligence. Yet she could never seem to learn the rules that other kids played by, the rules that defined how you were supposed to talk and how you were supposed to look and what you were supposed to be interested in. Rules that defined how smart was *too* smart.

Samantha noticed that Sasha wrote their name on homework assignments in Greek letters. She noticed that Sasha loved math and costumes and imaginary worlds. She noticed how passionate Sasha was about everything—their conviction that the ancient Greeks were better than the ancient Romans, that base twelve counting was

better than base ten, that cats were better than dogs. She noticed Sasha's long eyelashes, and their curly, shoulder-length brown hair.

"Samantha has a crush on me," Sasha told Karl, with a kind of anthropological interest. And it was true; she did. It didn't take long for the two of them to become inseparable. Sasha adopted Samantha's way of talking—pronouncing "Fail!" when something was lame and "Lol!" when something was funny. They played Dungeons & Dragons and then left the twelve-sided die on the floor and invented magical battles of their own. They each adopted a tiny, invisible baby dragon—Sasha's was named Cinnamon, Samantha's was Pendragon. They invented stupid TV shows, unleashing a cavalcade of ever-increasing banality as they tried to out-stupid each other. They were so close that Samantha felt like Sasha was inside her head, thinking her thoughts before she'd even thought them herself.

That closeness, of course, drew the attention of their classmates. As far as anyone could tell, Samantha was a girl and Sasha was a boy. The teasing was merciless. Everyone wanted to know if they were boyfriend and girlfriend, if they were K-I-S-S-I-N-G. (They weren't.) It drove Samantha crazy. She once grabbed a classmate by the arm, yelling, "*Stop making fun of us!*" Her fingers hit a pressure point and the girl screamed in pain. Samantha felt terrible about it. But still. Why couldn't everyone just leave them alone?

It was part of that disorienting feeling she'd had for years, that feeling that everyone except her had been issued a handbook. Samantha knew it was important to be pretty and cute, but she had no idea how to be those things, or even why she was supposed to want to be. Her body was growing curvier. Breasts burst from her chest like twin cannonballs, but they didn't feel sexy and good, they just

felt heavy. She hid them under baggy T-shirts and sweatshirts and watched the other girls come to school in tiny skirts and spaghetti straps, wondering why everything was so much harder for her than it was for them.

“Tell me how to be popular,” she begged one of the spaghetti-strap girls. The girl’s expression—her lowered eyes, the way she glanced around, seeking escape—told Samantha what a mistake the question had been. *If you have to ask, it’s out of reach.*

Something was wrong with her, really wrong. She was angry. She was sad. She was afraid. She wanted to die. In sixth grade, she said so in class. Her teacher told her parents, who took her to a therapist.

One day Samantha told the therapist about a video she’d seen on YouTube. Two young women stood back-to-back performing a slam poem called “Hir,” rotating to face the mic as they gave voice to a girl named Melissa and the boy inside her named James.

*Sometimes she wishes she could rip the skin off
her back,
Every moment of every day she feels trapped in
the flesh of a stranger.*

Watching it, Samantha felt something chime inside her—a bell vibrating in resonance. Before puberty, her physical body didn’t seem to have that much to do with who she was. People used to mistake her for a boy, but she had felt proud to be a girl. But now being a girl was like being stuffed into a heavy, constricting costume. She could barely breathe in it. The rules of the universe were fixed: You look a certain way and so you have to act a certain way

and people are going to treat you a certain way. There was no way to alter it.

“I think I might be . . . transgender?” she whispered to her therapist the next week.

“I don’t think you know what *transgender* means,” her therapist replied.

The bell that had been chiming inside her fell silent. She’s the expert, Samantha thought.

It would be another year before she told anyone else.