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Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*:

Finding Myself in the Margins

One of the earliest memories I still have mental access to is of my mom walking into my room to make sure I was actually getting ready to get in the shower (I've always had a tendency to not do the things I'm supposed to, when I'm supposed to). I still remember taking my shirt off and watching her face fill with both amusement and disappointment. I could never figure out how to gracefully pull my shirt off with my arms crossed, so I took the boyish route of grabbing the back of my collar and yanking it over my head.

"Lillie, honey, that's not how you take a shirt off. I've showed you the right way before, remember?"

"But this is how Dad does it."

"Well, you don't want to be like your father," she replied, laughing.

I stayed silent then, but the truth was, and still is, that I wanted to be exactly like my father. My dad represented masculinity for me, and that was always the space that I felt comfortable. I continued throughout my life, unable to do many things the "girl way." I always sat with my legs spread out, dresses made me uncomfortable, and when I hit puberty, I started stealing my dad's boxers to wear instead of the underwear my mom continually tried to buy me. My friends constantly said things like "you're such a boy, sometimes," to me, but I was perfectly okay with that as a descriptor. Once I discovered my attraction to women, I leaned even further into the masculine aspects of my identity. I loved playing the gentleman, buying flowers, opening doors, and always being the one to make the first move. I daydreamed about how I would ask my high school girlfriend to marry me, because obviously there was no doubt that I would be the one doing the asking. When straight people joked that I was the man in my

relationship, it didn't bother me; it made me feel like I was doing a good job. To me, masculinity was being in control, able to handle any situation. It meant that you were a rock that the people in your life could always lean on, and that's exactly what I wanted to be. For most of my life, being a masculine woman never seemed strange to me. I was fortunate enough to have friends and family that let me be me.

It wasn't until I started taking feminist classes in college that I realized how disconnected I felt from womanhood. I enjoyed learning about feminism, but it never seemed to fully apply to me. When it came to topics of sexuality or gender presentation, I always identified more with men than women. For the majority of my life, I didn't pay much attention to sexism because I didn't feel like it affected me, or, at least, didn't affect me in the same way it did other women. If someone was sexist towards me, it didn't piss me off that they were being sexist, it pissed me off that I felt emasculated. When someone perceived me as a typical representation of femininity, with expectations like being quiet and waiting to be wooed by men, I interpreted that as a slash against my masculinity, not as a sexist expectation to begin with. The category of "woman" increasingly became a very small one for me, and I started to think that maybe I didn't fit within its limitations. In my classes on feminism and womanhood, I felt more like an ally in the fight rather than someone directly affected by it. It wasn't that I didn't identify *as* a woman; it was just that womanhood as a category didn't feel like a complete description of my gender identity. I never identified with femininity, and I'm not attracted to men, and both of those are often required aspects of womanhood in our society.

As I started my junior year of college, this disconnect became a huge issue for me. It's difficult to explain other than I simply didn't feel right in my body or my life. I didn't feel real. I had no one I thought would be able to understand what I was experiencing, and the only queer person I knew at the time was the person I was dating. No labels seemed to fit me. I knew I

wasn't a man, but I felt pushed out of being a woman, and non-binary identity didn't feel right either. As if that wasn't confusing enough, repressed memories flooded my mind, and it came back to me for the first time that I had been sexually assaulted when I was younger. Once that memory came back, I couldn't let my partner touch me anymore. Every time she tried, my body would completely shut down or my mind would go somewhere else. I didn't know how to explain to her why that was. I sat back and watched our physical and emotional intimacy decrease until our relationship died. I felt completely detached, experiencing life as if I was a broken thing, so outside the labels known to me that I wasn't really sure I existed.

This was the mindset I walked into a queer literature class with, expecting to feel this way until I died, or this feeling of nothingness killed me, whichever came first. When I started reading Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* for class, the first passage that really struck me was this one:

For years I had watched my father deftly twist and flop his ties in a complicated series of moves, but I couldn't figure out the puzzle. I tied it in a clumsy knot. I climbed up on a footstool to lift the suit from the hanger. Its weight surprised me. It fell in a heap. I put on the suit coat and looked in the mirror. A sound came from my throat, sort of a gasp. I liked the little girl looking back at me. (15)

My heart rate increased when I read it. I suddenly remembered being 12 and my mom wondering why my dad's suit coats, belts, shirts, and pants had started disappearing from his closet. When I looked in the mirror wearing a men's jacket, I finally felt like me. I liked the reflection. I had forgotten those moments completely until I read Jess's experience. It occurred to me that if there was a character depicted as growing up experiencing the same things I did, maybe those experiences were normal, and I just didn't know that other lesbians experienced them. Maybe it

was possible to identify as masculine and female at the same time. After that realization, I think I read *Stone Butch Blues* faster than any other book I've ever read.

As I continued reading, I discovered I was right in many ways. It was mostly a lack of community that made me feel as alone and different as I did. When Jess enters the gay bar scene, ze experiences what I was never able to: seeing masculine women, lots of them, attracted to other women, and that being normal (at least within the community). There was no lesbian space near me where I could see women who were like how I wanted to be. As I read scenes of Jess being mentored by Butch Al and Jacqueline, and then Ed and Darlene, I received a sort of second-hand mentoring on butch identity that I didn't know I needed. When Jacqueline tells Jess that ze's a "real butch," Jess thinks: "I felt proud when she said that" (36). I started saying the word butch, again and again, to describe myself to other people, and I felt proud, too. I understand now that the reason "woman" didn't seem complete as a descriptor is because it wasn't. Yes, I am a woman, but I'm also butch, and both of those things form my identity. They can't be separated.

Through Jess's experiences, I found words for my own, especially when it came to sexual trauma. I said before that I didn't know what to say to describe what was going on with my body after realizing I was assaulted. *Stone Butch Blues* finally gave me the words that I was seeking, specifically in the moment when Jan confesses to Jess that she was left because of being stone. Feinberg writes of Jess's feelings: "Deep down, my insides seethed. I knew I was stone, too. It was a home alarm system that didn't seem to have an on-off switch. Once installed, the sirens went off and the gates shut, even if the intruder was loving. . . . I wondered how it would feel to be touched and not be afraid" (100). It's not a complicated metaphor. As far as metaphors go, Feinberg's tend to be more simplistic, but it's a perfect description of how a traumatized body reacts to being touched. Reading lines like this was liberating for me. I've come to love that word, "stone." It's a beautiful word for such an ugly experience to have. I say beautiful because

stone as a concept and word offers visibility without shame; it's not a victimizing label, and its main purpose is to denote to a partner how one's approach to physical intimacy functions a little differently. And, the most beautiful thing about it, as Feinberg makes clear throughout the novel, is that stone can be melted. When Jess sleeps with Angie, Angie says to hir:

I just wish I could make you feel that good. You're stone already, aren't you?' I dropped my eyes. She lifted my chin up and looked me in the eyes. "Don't be ashamed of being stone..., honey. It's just that you don't have to get stuck in being stone, either. It's OK if you find a femme you can trust in bed and you want to say that you need something, or you want to be touched. (76)

This passage spoke directly to me as someone who had my sexuality forcefully taken from me, and it was comforting to be told that I don't have to live in that trauma forever.

Growing up, I never had a coming-of-age novel, film, or anything that spoke to me as a lesbian, especially as a lesbian who had survived trauma. That is not to say that they didn't exist; I just didn't know where to look. Part of the reason I love *Stone Butch Blues* as much as I do, is because, in many ways, it is a lesbian coming-of-age novel that manages to be completely honest in how some people's coming-of-age stories are shaped by trauma. One of the things that Feinberg does so well is structuring the novel in such a way that it mirrors the perspective of someone who has been repeatedly abused. For a good portion of *Stone Butch Blues*, every time life looks up for Jess, something horrible happens. When the drag queens buy Jess a new suit and ze gets the opportunity to host a drag show, the show is interrupted by police and Jess gets brutally assaulted. Ze falls in love with Theresa, but with societal attitudes towards butch lesbians becomes increasingly hostile, ze decides to go on hormones and Theresa breaks up with hir for it. As ze begins to build a home and find other people like hir represented throughout history, hir home gets burned to the ground: "I bounded home like a panther, feeling fine as

could be. . . . I heard the fire before I saw it” (265-266). Feinberg uses almost identical language to describe when Jess is assaulted and has his jaw wired shut: “I clutched the quarts of elderberries against my leather jacket and grinned, knowing how excited Ruth would be that I’d found them in wintertime. . . . I heard the three teenage boys before I saw them” (281). This repeated representation of joy being cut short by horrific circumstances mimics how a traumatized person operates throughout life, distrusting happiness and expecting something to go wrong.

Considering the traumatic experiences represented in *Stone Butch Blues*, Feinberg’s structuring of the novel feels incredibly realistic, but through Jess’s growth, it is made clear that life doesn’t have to be experienced that way forever. In the same way that stone can be melted, trauma can be worked through. This is beautifully represented in one of Jess and Ruth’s earlier interactions:

Ruth set a huge salad in front of me. There were yellow-and-orange blossoms in the bowl along with greens I’d never seen before. My eyes filled with tears. “Ruth, there’s flowers in my salad.”

Ruth smiled. “Those are nasturtiums. They’re beautiful, aren’t they?”

“Can I eat them?” She nodded. I shook my head. “I hate to eat this. It’s like a work of art.”

Ruth sat down next to me. “That’s part of how starved you’ve been. I think you’re afraid this is the last beautiful thing that’s going to happen to you, and you want to hold onto it.” (276)

There were a multitude of moments in *Stone Butch Blues* where I felt as though the characters speaking to Jess were also speaking to me, and this was no exception. I often find myself missing every person I’ve ever known, every memory that is now gone, and part of that comes from

believing that they were the last person who will ever love me, the last beautiful thing I'll ever experience. Feinberg perfectly showcases that desperation to hold on to something. After reading this passage, something in me broke, partly because I felt so much sadness for Jess, but also because I felt such sadness for myself. I sometimes have to remind myself that I'm only 20 years old, and that there are actually more beautiful things left for me to experience in my life. It's hard for me to remember how young I am, in the same way that Jess snapped at Angie when she asked how ze was, saying: "How old were you when you were my age?" (71). Within the queer community, pain makes many of us older than we might appear.

Obviously, not everything that Jess as a character went through is the same as what I experienced or will experience. Jess, as a trans individual, certainly has a more complicated relationship with gender identity than I do as a cisgender woman who happens to also identify as a butch lesbian. What I love so much about *Stone Butch Blues*, though, is that it's the first piece of literature I've ever read that delves into the uniquely complicated relationship with gender that so many lesbians have. Often, lesbian representation is fully focused on sexuality, which makes sense, considering lesbianism, after all, is a sexuality. The issue, however, is that even though sexuality and gender are completely separate entities, they are intrinsically intertwined within our society. Womanhood comes with an expectation of heterosexuality as femininity, which often leaves lesbians, especially butch lesbians, in a separate, not-fully-women category. That is not to say that there are not plenty of lesbians who feel perfectly comfortable with femininity and womanhood; it is simply to say that there are many who feel isolated for identifying with masculinity or loving women, me being one of them. A great scene in *Stone Butch Blues* that shows this difference is when Jess and Theresa are discussing women's liberation:

"You're really getting into this women's lib stuff, aren't you?"

... “I am. I’m realizing a lot of things about my own life—about being a woman—that I never even thought about until the women’s movement.”

I listened to her. “I don’t feel it so much,” I told her. ‘Maybe ‘cause I’m a butch.’”

She kissed my forehead. “Butches need women’s liberation, too.”

I laughed. “We do?”

Theresa nodded. “Yes, you do. Anything that’s good for women is good for butches. .

. . You know how sometimes you say ‘I’ll never understand women’? Well, think about it, sweetheart—you are a woman. So what are you really saying? It’s sort of like a gun with a barrel that’s open on both ends. When you shoot it, you end up wounding yourself at the same time.” (148-149)

This moment made me laugh, because it reminded of when I got in trouble with my first girlfriend for saying those very same words: “I’ll never understand women.” At the time, I was sixteen and cocky, and had no issue running my mouth saying things like that. She was unamused, stared me down and asked, “How do you manage to be sexist when you’re also a girl?” I didn’t really know what to say in response to that. Looking back, I see now that my relationship with womanhood and masculinity has been complicated since before I can remember, and I’ve always had to negotiate it, even if I didn’t know it at the time.

Not only did *Stone Butch Blues* make me realize that I’m butch, but it made me rethink my previous understanding of butch and femme as categories. Prior to reading *Stone Butch Blues*, everything I knew about butch and femme as labels came from straight perception. It never before occurred to me that I could identify as butch; I thought I would be disallowed from claiming the word because my hair wasn’t short or buzzed, or I didn’t dress manly enough. While reading, I discovered that butch as a category is so much more than just gender roles put on lesbian relationships, and the policing of who can identify as what seems to mostly come

from non-lesbians. Personally, I've come to interpret butch as a lesbian-specific way of experiencing gender, a label that suits me and feels incredibly freeing. And, just like Jess, I swell with pride whenever I say or am told that I'm a real butch.

Works Cited

Feinberg, Leslie. *Stone Butch Blues*. 1993. 20th Anniversary Author Edition, 2014,

<https://www.lesliefeinberg.net/>.*

* Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* is available for free download on hir website.