

"HOT, HEARTBREAKING, AND THRILLINGLY VICTORIOUS." —MIRANDA JULY

STAG

DANCE

A NOVEL & STORIES

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PETERS**

AUTHOR OF *DETRANSITION, BABY*

BY TORREY PETERS

Stag Dance

Detransition, Baby



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*To Cecilia: You asked me to hang out, but instead I worked on this novel,
and then you were gone.*

INFECT YOUR FRIENDS AND LOVED ONES



Tipton, Iowa, seven years after contagion

I'm lugging a bucket of grain for the sows, using two hands to keep the weight of it, hung from that thin wire, from biting into my somehow never-callousing fingers, when Keith comes up behind me and hoists it away from me with one hand. He holds it up, still with one hand, and *tsks* at me. "Looks like you need some help there, little lady."

He's got the macho bravado of all the T-slabs, complete with the aggression and rages—plus he's six foot five if he's an inch. Our relative heights place my line of vision at his chest, so I'm able to observe from up close how he wears a pair of old Carhartt coveralls unbuttoned down the front to show off his hairy bitch tits. He's so proud of them that even out here in the country he shows them off, a bit of conspicuous consumption that even the most isolated farmers can read: *I'm so flush with testosterone that I overinject. How about that, you low-count ration-dependent weaklings?* I'm grateful he doesn't wear shirts with the chest cutouts, a recent fashion among the slabs.

In business, the customer is supposed to always be right, but Keith takes as his due the notion that he's in charge, and I'm the little follower. He doesn't have any idea that before the contagion spread, I was already trans, already injecting estrogen. He just figures I'm another auntie-boy, one of those males who couldn't afford testosterone after all the hoarding during the Rift Wars and so began injecting poor-quality estrogen. Hence all the "little lady" stuff, which most folks would understand as a gibe about how auntie-boys were said to have survived the war. I let him assume that. I need the black-market estrogen he harvests from those ugly mutant pigs.

With estrogen tightly rationed and regulated, the provisional government allots the good E for women of promising fertility. An older woman would have to have a relative in government or have the money for a really well-

placed bribe to get on the ration list. A trans woman? People still believe that we antediluvian trans women started the contagion. Even if we came out of hiding, there's no bribe large enough to get us estrogen.

Keith is doing curls with the bucket of feed, making the veins in his forearm pop like creeping vines. I wait for him to finish, but now the game is to show that his strength can outlast my patience. I gesture to the sows. "You want to feed the pigs yourself? Go right ahead."

He hands the bucket back to me. "Nah, I like seeing you prance and scurry away from them." Feeding the pigs means getting in the pen and scattering all the grain, hopefully before one of the freakish monsters knocks me over to get a whole bucket of feed to herself.

"Fuck you, Keith."

"Ooh, sweetheart. You just let me know when and where."

I'm paying Keith extra to learn pig husbandry, a pretext, while I wait for an opportune moment to steal a few piglets from him. Then Lexi and I will be able to raise our own drove of sows. Unfortunately, I've come to hate the creatures—both Keith and the pigs. Keith for obvious reasons, and the pigs because they're genetically modified to overproduce hormones bioidentical to those that humans used to produce, back before the contagion. Industrial-grade hormones in my body make *me* a crazy bitch, and I'm not six hundred pounds with inch-long razors for teeth. A month ago, I broke a toe kicking one of those porcine tanks in the snout. She wasn't slowed for a second. Just barreled me over and bit a two-inch gash into my thigh when I didn't immediately dump the feed bucket for her gustatory delight. Another scar.

I manage okay this time—even get a short retaliatory kick in on the black-and-pink one as I hop the fence out of the pen. The monster doesn't notice, but Keith, leaning against the doorframe at the edge of the barn, does.

"Is it your time of the month or something?" he calls out. As if. He shakes his head. "You're bitchier than my pigs. Save some supply for the real girls, huh?" He assumes I'm just a typical dealer, selling to women desperate for fertility and pregnancy. That's what most of his stock goes for—the population is aging, dwindling.

I pick a strand of muddy straw from my pants as I walk over to him. “No periods yet. Are you holding out on the good stuff, Keith?”

He pulls from his pocket a little baggie with ten 5-mL glass vials inside. “This here’s pure. Enough to make a baby factory run for a month. Probably even make an auntie-boy like you preggo.”

I hold out my hand, but he doesn’t move to give me the vials sitting in his fat paw. Just leers at me. “Any of your girls need a stud, you know where to find me.”

“Sure, Keith.” He says this every time I re-up, but for once, I indulge a moment, contemplating the image of Keith trying to seduce and mount Lexi. It’s a funny, satisfying picture. He’d have just enough time, before she’d end his stupid existence, to raise those white-blond eyebrows in surprise at what he found.

Seattle, contagion day

Lexi pulls up the hem of her skirt, showing off her thigh, more tattooed than when I last saw it. “See that?” she asks. I’m not thrilled with the vibe. Lexi has to know showing off her thighs won’t have the desired effect on me.

“See what?” I ask.

“Here,” Lexi says, and points. Above a tattoo of a ship is another simpler tattoo, maybe a stick and poke. It reads *t4t*.

“T4t?”

“Yeah,” Lexi says, “like we used to be. Or maybe you never really were.”

“Lexi, can we not do this again?”

She lets her skirt drop, covering the tattoo. “Fine. Anyway, now it’s different. I’m t4t for you in the abstract. Trans girls loving trans girls. And you’re trans, so you’re included.”

My annoyance flares: Lexi, deigning to include me in whatever she’s up to now. But she’s half right; Lexi’s somehow ended up maven of the Seattle trans girl scene, and I want to be included. The year during which she and I weren’t speaking was a lonely one. “So what do I get to be a part of?”

“The future,” answers Lexi. “In the future, everyone will be trans.”

I resist an urge to roll my eyes. Often, Lexi sounds like a sophomore who’s just enrolled in a critical theory course. I can’t tell if the other girls listen to her despite her super-basic analysis or because of it. Everything with her and her clique is gender theory, or else it’s transphobia, abusers, outrage, and Down With Cis!

I guess I didn’t fully resist that eye roll, because she pulls back and says, “Oh, I don’t mean that everyone will be trans in some squishy philosophical way. I mean that we’re all gonna be on hormones. Even the cis.” She reconsiders the wording of her statement and then revises: “Especially the

cissies.” She’s got a plastic canister next to her that she fetched a few minutes before. She picks up the canister and taps on it ceremoniously. “You’ll see. When I say the future, I don’t mean some distant era. I mean in about six months.”

“Lexi,” Raleen says. “Don’t, please, just put it back.”

Her voice is nervous. As always, I’ve forgotten about Raleen, because she barely speaks, and even when she does, she hardly makes sense. Somehow, even though she stands a half foot taller than me, in the unobtrusive way she folds herself she appears to take up less space than a child, receding into the couch that is her temporary home until I forget about her once more.

We’re sitting in the living room of the shared house Lexi lives in, a falling down Victorian on the edge of the Capitol Hill neighborhood in Seattle. Even with the siding falling off, Lexi and her roommates shouldn’t be able to afford it, except that it belongs to the uncle of one of the girls, who rents it cheaply while he waits for a developer to come along and offer the right price. To atone for accepting a cis dude’s charity, Lexi offers the couches downstairs to any passing trans woman without a steady place to sleep. For the past few months, it’s been Raleen, who’s apparently homeless, despite her enrollment as an NSF-funded graduate student in molecular biology at the University of Washington. She began transition halfway through her dissertation research, and her faculty mentor lost interest in advising and collaborating with her. Her parents, back home in Podunk, Nowhere, have no idea about her transition, and it seems to be in order to draw out their ignorance, as much as for herself, that she shows up at the lab from time to time and putters around, while everyone waits for the last of her NSF funding to run out. She’s been on 2C-B half the times I’ve seen her, which Lexi says Raleen has synthesized herself. It’s some hallucinogen that is apparently easier to produce than LSD, at least with the chemicals Raleen has access to at her lab. Maybe she’s on it today; maybe that’s why she’s all nervous? Or maybe she’s just a weirdo.

“Raleen, we talked about this,” snaps Lexi.

“About what?” I ask. And suddenly I am the one barely there. Lexi and Raleen ignore me, playing out some wordless argument. From my angle, Lexi is outlined against the front window, made of five vertical panes of glass, in each of which the girls in the house have hung gauzy transparent fabric in blue, pink, and white, to make the window into a trans flag. They take a lot of selfies in front of it, not just for political reasons, but because the light filters softly and flatteringly through the fabric. Silhouetted in front of the sunlit flag, Lexi looks suddenly striking: propagandistic and imposing.

Raleen loses the staring contest. “Just—oh, never mind,” she mutters, but watches Lexi intently. It sometimes upsets me the way Lexi’s made Raleen her puppy.

Lexi shifts to face me. She’s playing a solo game of hot potato, passing the canister from one hand to another. “Remember that project Raleen talked about a while back? How she’d been messing around with that pig vaccine?”

About a month ago, Raleen had been as talkative as I’d ever seen her. Going on about some Australian vaccine used to castrate pigs—or technically, it wasn’t castration. The vaccine created an autoimmune response that prevented boars from ever being able to metabolize the precursors to testosterone, which otherwise would cause the “boar taint” flavor that ruins pork from male pigs. Raleen said it’d be simple to make a similar vaccine that would work along the same mechanisms in humans. Whoever they injected would need to take some form of hormone therapy for the rest of their lives, as their own body would attack any hormones it produced itself. Raleen, Lexi, and I spent the night jokingly plotting to inject the vaccine into J. Michael Bailey. I liked the joke of making Bailey into some sort of hormone-reliant pseudo-trans. I still like it as a joke.

Lexi waits. She can see I get it. “Lexi, that’s only funny as a fantasy.”

Raleen tries to assure me. “It’s safe. We already tested part of the vaccine on ourselves. One version on me, and a later version on Lexi.” She starts in somewhat incoherently on her testosterone levels, how she hasn’t taken any spiro or blockers in weeks and her T is near zero, then switches subjects in a way I can’t follow. She concludes, “This is the final version.”

At that, Lexi stands up, opens the canister, and pulls out what looks to me like a Tide stick, or an orange felt-tip marker. “See, we loaded it in an autoinjector, like in an EpiPen.”

She takes a few steps toward me, holding it in her outstretched hand as though she wants to pass it to me. She pauses and asks, almost sweetly, “Remember when I used to show you my scars, in bed, back in New Hampshire?”

Again! She won’t stop bringing up when we used to sleep together. She does it even more when she has an audience.

“I’m trying to forget.”

I want to see the EpiPen thing. I reach out from my sitting position so she can hand it to me, but fast, so fast I don’t even flinch, she closes her fingers around it like the hilt of a dagger, and slams the blunt end into my forearm. There’s a prick as the needle goes in, and when I pull back, the point scrapes my skin. By the time I’m instinctively cradling my arm, blood is welling up.

I’m in disbelief, looking at Lexi, trying to understand how, somehow, it could have been a mistake.

“Now you’ll have a scar too,” says Lexi.

Winter, New Hampshire, two years to contagion

Lexi and I are in her bed, and she is showing me her scars. She has many. Morning light bends around the edges of thick black curtains. I wonder if it snowed more overnight, if I'll be able to drive home. Lexi spent all her savings on a small three-room cabin on a lake in rural New Hampshire, the interior marred by half-finished repairs or renovations; nails and screws menace soft fabric or skin from every surface.

Lexi was a committed alcoholic for a few years. She started working for her father's company right out of high school. By the time she hit twenty, she had a daily routine: Come home from work, lower the blackout shades so no one could see in, put on women's clothes, and get to downing a bottle of vodka. She bought the cabin so that she could expand the routine without attracting notice. Occasionally, she'd get it into her head to tear out a cabinet, or pull up a floorboard, then lose interest as the alcohol swamped over her. "This place is a shithole," she said, by way of inviting me in for the first time. In the eight years she has owned the house, I'm the first person she's allowed inside, ashamed to let anyone else see either the skirts and panties or the vodka bottles.

"What's this one?" I ask, tracing a long scar of faded pink on her forearm. I'm lying propped up on one elbow, pressed against her prone body.

"I used to make bats on the lathe for my baseball team," she says. "Didn't always do it sober."

"And this one?" A white button of scar tissue just under her armpit.

"Fell over blacked out and hung myself up from a nail." She isn't bragging. She's matter-of-fact: half a claim of responsibility and half a shrugging abdication of it, the way one might explain that there's garbage everywhere because a raccoon got into the trash. Yeah, you could have fastened down the lid, but raccoons gonna raccoon, so what can you do?

“Any of these scars from bullets?” I ask. Which is not as crazy a question as it sounds. Lexi has a lot of guns. Handguns are scattered on her coffee table the way that television and video-game controllers clutter up mine at home. We are right now lying in bed beneath an arsenal: a sniper rifle, a shotgun, and an AR-15 modified to be automatic, all hung horizontally above the headboard so that you can accelerate from REM sleep to deadly motherfucker in a matter of seconds. Last night, I asked if they were loaded, and Lexi shrugged. “Wouldn’t be much good if they weren’t.” After a few beers, she admitted that a few of the fucked up things in her place were fucked up or half replaced because she had shot them to shit while drunk.

I’m fascinated and repelled by the life on display in this little house. It is nothing like mine. I am getting a doctorate at Dartmouth. I live with my girlfriend of eight years in an apartment attached to a stately New England house that belongs to a professor of medieval literature, a woman who certainly owns no guns. To furnish our apartment, I brought my grandmother’s midcentury Eames table, and my girlfriend brought a vintage Baccarat vase. We both know from Eames and Baccarat. Most of my friends live in one of the five largest American cities and work jobs in media or for firms of some sort. Lexi and I share only three points of commonality: We are both trans, we are both newly on hormones, and we are both lonely as fuck.

I answered Lexi’s ad in the “t4t” section of Craigslist personals. After talking online, we met up at a gay bar in Manchester. There, Lexi admitted to having gone through my Facebook photos. “Your girlfriend is really hot,” and she paused and spun her beer coaster. “So, like, I don’t get why you’re here.” I didn’t know what to say. How do I tell a near-stranger that my girlfriend and I have had sex only once since I went on hormones? How that one time, with my cock hard and vulnerable, I looked down at her so gratefully, admiring that amazing, undulating hair fanned across the pillow like a mermaid’s, just as she furrowed her brow and said disconsolately, “You smell different.” How just then, her face crumpled into tears? How I tried to get her to have sex then anyway? How I wake every morning afterward to

her back, want to spoon her, but pull away from the chill of her grief, knowing that I beckoned it by my choice? How do I talk about the nights spent hiding from her, Skyping men out of a need for validation, the things I tell them so that they'll say *Yes, you're a woman, and I'm gonna fuck you like one?* Most recently, it's a man named Sidney, in Seattle, with whom I play elaborate phone-sex role-play games in which I'm his submissive silicone trophy wife. Why did I want to meet Lexi? The answer is the things I can't say. That I can barely think.

My answer is the same as hers on guns, the same kind of wordlessness. "Why do you need so many?" Four times she began an answer, something about how no one is going to hassle her, that she had grown up with guns always around, that she's not a victim, that she's had some bad trouble. Each time she seemed as unsure as I had been when she asked why I had wanted to meet her. Not that either of us didn't have an answer. Our answers were just unsayable.

The next scar Lexi shows me is on her abdomen, and the next after that, a jagged line cut by a fishing hook where her hip bone kisses against the inside of her skin, which she pulls her panties down and aside to show me, then she asks me, vulnerable as she's ever been, to stay down there.

Seattle, contagion day

My arm no longer hurts, but I'm cradling it anyway, to emphasize that I've been wronged. I'm mad in a way I haven't felt in years—mad like I got when I was a teenager. Lexi fled right after she stuck me, stomping up the stairs and locking herself in her room; she's got some kind of metal blaring, so I'm outside her door, screaming through it. I'm not even sure what I've said so far. But the important points I've made are that she and Raleen are fucking losers, and this is what I get for trying to be included in their stupid freak coven. Raleen isn't one for confrontation, so I can't quite understand why she hasn't fled too. She's at the bottom of the stairs, watching me like the dumb puppy Lexi's made of her.

Finally, I whirl on her. "What are you down there waiting for?"

She widens her eyes and shifts her feet, but doesn't move.

"Fuck you both." I pound down the stairs toward Raleen, expecting her to get out of my way, but instead she reaches out and snatches my wrist.

"You can't leave."

"Don't touch me."

She doesn't release my arm. "Say you won't go." Her fingernails dig into my skin.

"Raleen! That hurts. Are you tripping? Let go of me!"

"You're sick," she insists.

I twist my arm, trying to torque it free. "What was in that needle? Your estrogen? Stop playing Lexi's tricks."

Abruptly, she screams, "You're sick!" Her fingers grip down again, cording tight as she pulls herself to her full height for leverage. The aggression slows me, puts a crack of doubt in my anger. She's anxious. Unnerved. When I stop struggling, she drops my hand and raises her arms. "Please," she says. "Let me show you."

On the couch downstairs, she pulls open her laptop, folding her legs up small as I lean toward her to see the screen. She calls up the website of a bioengineering company called Improvac and protests that she didn't know Lexi would do it. But I can't make sense of the site, so I can't figure out what she's trying to disavow.

When I can get her to stop mewling about what she did and didn't know, she explains how the company, Improvac, has been vaccinating pigs and deer against their own sex hormones for years. The vaccine causes a body's antibodies to bind to gonadotropin (GnRH), the hormone that signals the production of all sex hormones in mammals (estrogen, testosterone, progesterone). The website features an animated video intended for an audience of industrial pig farmers, showing how the vaccine makers synthesize GnRH, then hook it to a foreign protein, which they inject into a body. The antibodies of the immune system then attack and clear the protein, but afterward, the immune system reclassifies the body's natural GnRH as part of an ongoing threat. Subsequently any and all GnRH triggers an autoimmune response, resulting in a complete cessation of the production of all sex hormones.

In the commercial vaccines, the producers bonded synthesized GnRH to an inert protein, or one that the immune system can easily clear. That's what Raleen did in the trial injections she gave herself and Lexi. But the version Lexi stuck in me? That was a GnRH bonded to a live bacteria.

"What does that mean, Raleen?"

She pauses and says quietly, "It means you're contagious."

I want to scream at her again, but I'm afraid she'll clam up. My fists are so tight the nails feel like they're breaking skin, but I hold my tongue.

"I chose a strain of antibiotic-resistant strep pneumonia," Raleen goes on, pulling up a description of the illness on WebMD. "It's a common bacteria that can cause mild ear infections, but that people often carry asymptotically so they don't even know they're spreading it as they go around coughing, sneezing, or touching." She begins to cry.