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On Binders and Growing Up: Questions I Keep, Quietly

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This spoken piece reflects on an old binder, moving between childhood memory, feminist critique, and neurodivergent epistemologies to think about how children navigate gender, conduct, and relations. Approaching childhood not as a stage of passivity, but as a site of intense reflexivity, experimentation, and sense-making, the piece traces the speaker's attempts to transform social norms and expectations into a livable hermeneutic. Holding the failures of that work alongside the effort invested in trying to behave, belong, and become on one's own terms, the essay offers a neurodivergent lens to think the promises and the risks of candor together, and to ask how practices rooted in repetition, attention, and decipherment might be inherited, reworked, and rewired toward other forms of relationality to oneself and to others.

This is a spoken essay, carried and repeated inwardly. Line breaks and spacing mark internal pauses, hesitation, and time left for resonance. Not verse.

I wonder how many of you
have a binder.

A binder waiting for you,
in your childhood homes,
hidden
under your childhood bed.

I have one.

It's pink.
Very, very girly.

I picture it sometimes,
from my adult bed,
in my adult room,
through my grown-up eyes.

I can still feel its weight.

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Not just the physical weight:
how it lay across my chest,
how soothing the compression was.
But the emotional weight too:
the shame of needing that prosthesis,
the guilt
of living with a secret.

But before you picture yours,
let me pause and clarify.

It's a queer binder, no doubt—
but probably not the one you're imagining right now.

As a child,
I associated the gender binary with adulthood.
I did not quite feel at home in either category,
but

I wanted in.

Or rather
I wanted to opt out of childhood.
Out of being watched.
Out of being handled.
Out of being spoken for.

I had somehow come to understand
that some gestures,
some shapes,
were influencing how people read
and treat others.

And so, I thought that femininity
would mark me
as something other
than a kid.

I thus wore my swimsuit top to school,
stuffed socks under the fabric.
I sneaked in to try on my mother's creams and make-up.
And I shaved my legs in the bathtub,
like in one of those Venus ads.

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Sedgwick once wrote
that her childhood felt like a drag show –
a continuous performance of childlikeness,
already known to be parody.

She doesn't linger, though,
on what happens offstage.
On what we do before
and after the show.

On how
we too
try to take off,
find a quiet spot,
to finally fake-smoke
a badly needed cigarette.

The binder I want to talk about speaks to that.
To how we learn to be kids and how we slip the adult gaze.
To how, backstage, we piece ourselves together,
sometimes against the norm,
sometimes through it.

That binder is an ordinary object, really.
A massive, compact folder,
into which I,
between the ages of six and nine,
cut, and clipped, and carefully filed
pages and pages from children's magazines.

Pages about how to be a good daughter,
a good student,
a good friend.

Pages about how to behave safely, fairly, successfully.

A hand-bound manual
of social rules and expectations.

So let me ask again:
How many of you have a binder like this?
Some kind of DIY project, aimed especially at self-fashioning?
And if you do,
what did you make of it then?
And what would you make of it now?

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I ask because I stumble over that question for myself.

I know why I stopped.
It's a very ordinary tale of middle school bullying:
of girls' codes,
and how quickly they turn into weapons.

I dropped the binder then,
certain I would never open it again.

And yet
in truth,
that thing never really left me.

I still turn the plastic dividers in my mind from time to time,
wondering
what had drawn me to fill them up.

Over the years—
as a devoted overthinker—
I've tried to retro-engineer the logic behind it,
and I've moved through different frames.

I read it through the lens
of social mobility more than once.

My dad grew up working class,
my mum middle class,
and we lived
in a very upper-class neighborhood.

My parents were people who knew
the difference.
They talked about it plainly—
the quiet classed disdain,
the indirect mechanisms of exclusion.

The stakes of fitting in were clear enough.

The codes of conduct, though?
Multiple.
Contradictory.
And never quite ranked in the same way twice.

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I probably turned to the children's press
to calm myself down.

It felt clever then –
a reasonable solution.

Why not indeed
go straight
to the one cultural artefact
that claimed to explain everything
to gather all those scattered rules,
and turn them into something manageable.

An ABC of girlhood.

A small, orderly system
for behaving normally across places
that all had
their own criteria.

That frame,
however,
does not really capture it all.

The bodies pictured.
The trajectories assumed.
The futures rendered desirable.

Everything
and everyone
firmly positioned
on the privileged side
of every binary.

That's another way power works sneakily and in plain sight.

Adults printing advice for children
in the name of self-care,
while quietly circulating tools
for the reproduction
of a violent
and unequal
social order.

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From that angle,
the innocence of that homemade self-help book
feels like
complicity.

Not only because it shaped my early sense of
a good body,
a good mind,
a good self.

But because, at the time,
the material did not
unsettle me enough
to make me turn away.

The fact that no one forced me,
that I exposed myself
to it willingly,
laboriously, diligently even,
is telling.

It's also difficult to stomach.

For a long time,
returning to the binder thus meant
remembering eagerness as an ethical mistake,
and naivety as a political flaw.

It almost always ended the same way:

with contempt for the person
who had made it.

Lately, though
more recently
I've begun to look at that personal archive
differently.

Through a neurodivergent lens.

Not one that softens the critique
or undoes the lessons learned.

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But one that sharpens their edges,
by reminding me that my interest in conduct
is just as specific now
as it was then
and still places care
at the center of my scrutiny.

That lens refuses
the comforting distance
that discarding and disavowing creates
between who you used to be
and who you are now,

insisting instead
on a sustained line of inquiry.

It lets us see the practices in-between the pages:
the cumulative gathering of information,
the attention to puzzling fragments,
the invention of ways to sort out
what care meant
and what it could not mean

as a method worth keeping
and rewiring.

Not to get rid
of a candor
I can't shake out of anyway,

but to work through its risks,
using the honesty and delicateness
it also carries

in order to imagine
other forms of coherence,
other ways of relating.

New bonds.

The binder, in that sense,
becomes crucial
precisely in its failure
to teach me how to practice care
as we are taught to

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in that straightforward manner
that assumes naturalness,
and equates good intention
with the absence of domination.

This reading
might not be the last.

If anything,
I know now that
the binder consistently resists
the full grasp
of my grown-up mind,
always one step
ahead of me.

But I like that this one
leaves room for failed and future experiments,
while opening a space
to consider

that other children
might already have been
more perceptive than me
quietly,
or not so quietly,
redefining what it takes to be
polite, respectful, friendly,
or loving,

turning careless injunctions
into careful practices.

Maybe that's why,
in the end,
of all the artefacts I made in my childhood,
of all the attempts at crafting a self,
this is the only one I kept.

Because it continues
to gesture toward
someone I'm not,
but someone

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I strive to become.

So, I'd like to ask you,
one last time:

How many of you
have a binder like that?

How many of you
can point to one object
a folder, a piece of fabric, maybe a box
that holds your struggle?

That captures your confusion
and your agency?
That reveals your lack of judgment,
and calls on you
to find a more creative response?

I like to think
that we all have a binder.
Even if we've never clipped
a single page.
Even if we've never worn one.

And that it matters
to honor their ambivalence.

To recognize that
from the back corners
of the places we left behind,

they are a safekeeping of
something etched into us,
an inscription to be carried forward:

not being able
to think straight
is a promise,

not a curse.

Thank you.

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