

# Redefining *Realness*

*My Path to Womanhood,  
Identity, Love & So Much More*

JANET MOCK

**ATRIA** BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi



**ATRIA** BOOKS

A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.  
1230 Avenue of the Americas  
New York, NY 10020

Copyright © 2014 by Janet Mock

Poem on page 141 from *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Copyright  
© 1987, 1999, 2007 by Gloria Anzaldúa. Reprinted by permission of Aunt Lute Books.  
[www.auntlute.com](http://www.auntlute.com)

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof  
in any form whatsoever. For information, address Atria Books Subsidiary Rights  
Department, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020.

First Atria Books hardcover edition February 2014

**ATRIA** BOOKS and colophon are trademarks of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Simon &  
Schuster Special Sales at 1-866-506-1949 or [business@simonandschuster.com](mailto:business@simonandschuster.com).

The Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau can bring authors to your live event. For  
more information or to book an event, contact the Simon & Schuster Speakers  
Bureau at 1-866-248-3049 or visit our website at [www.simonspeakers.com](http://www.simonspeakers.com).

*Interior design by Jill Putorti*

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mock, Janet.

Redefining realness : my path to womanhood, identity, love & so much more/ by  
Janet Mock. — First Atria Books hardcover edition.

pages cm

1. Mock, Janet. 2. Transgender people—United States—Biography. 3. Racially  
mixed people—United States—Biography. 4. Gender identity—United States—Case  
studies. 5. Self-actualization (Psychology)—Case studies. I. Title.

HQ77.8.M63A3 2014

306.76'8—dc23

2013047625

ISBN 978-1-4767-0912-3

ISBN 978-1-4767-0914-7 (ebook)

*For Aaron,  
who loved me because of myself,  
held me accountable to my truth,  
and became home*

NEW YORK, 2009

I thought about telling Aaron on our first date. That moment in the back booth of that Brazilian restaurant in the West Village when my head rested in the space where his chest met his armpit. He smelled like sweat and cilantro and looked a lot like that one thing I yearned *and* feared: intimacy.

He was looking at me, his brown eyes studying mine. *Can he see me?* I thought.

"I see the little girl in you," Aaron said, seemingly surprised by his discovery. "Will she play with me?"

I wanted to tell him then. He was the kind of charming I couldn't resist blushing at and scolding myself for being moved by. I knew I was slipping away from my own barricades of insecurity and into a more honest nook. But decades of internalized shame about my past and its relation to my present couldn't be undone by mere charm and romantic projections. It would take something special, outside of myself, to unwrap me. I had an instinct that Aaron was something special.

We had met only days earlier, the night before Easter Sunday 2009, at a Lower East Side bar called La Caverna. It resembled a cave—on purpose—and was spritzed in pungent hopefulness and perfumed desperation, the official scent of most of my single Saturday nights in Manhattan. *Maybe tonight he'll walk through that door*, I heard the resounding chorus of women sing. They were lured to the city by the unattainable glamour and girlfriend-ships of *Sex and the City* or the navel-gazing of *Felicity*, the ones who flocked here to be among the achievers, who fled the tiny towns they were born into in hopes of growing up into starter offices and enviable wardrobes and a one-bedroom with the Channing Tatum of their reality. Maybe I'm projecting my dreams here.

Gratefully, the three slightly spilled martinis I consumed pacified my longing for all of this and much more. Pop beats filled my head as my booty and voluminous hair, draped over my bare shoulders, bounced on the dance floor. In this swaying mass, no one's past mattered. Every person's only requisite was to keep moving. I twirled and twerked to Kelis's "Milkshake," my gold-tinted curls bobbing around my face. I felt the brightness of my wide, toothy smile and the am- pleness of my cheekbones, a feature given to me by Mom, and the prominence of my forehead, inherited from Dad. My pointed widow's peak draped a thick tendril over my right eye, shaded in bronze eye shadow and framed by an arched brown brow.)

I was soon stopped in midorbit by the sight of a man. *Fuck, he's hot!* was my first thought. His skin was the color of sweet toffee, the kind that gets stuck in your teeth. He had shiny black wavy hair, just long enough to run my fingers through, and that indistinguishable ethnic look that one could take for Dominican or Brazilian or some kind of swirly black. He looked dangerously yummy, with sly brown eyes, one of which was punctuated with a horizontal scar that matched the mischievous curve of his smirk. His beauty—birthed out of my

mental sketch of Mr. Hypothetical Husband—led me to commit to sleeping with him if the night led us to a bed.

He said hey, and I said hey back.

"I'm on my way to the bathroom, but will you be here when I come back?" he asked.

I nodded while flipping my curls to the other side of my face: my go-to "My Hair Is Real I'm So Flirty and Effortless" move. He returned a few minutes later with that same smirk. "Take a walk with me," he said, nodding toward the exit.

"I don't even know your name," I said.

"If you come with me, maybe I'll tell you," he said, pointing toward the exit.

I rolled my eyes and smiled as we walked out the door.

He led me a few blocks away to a fluorescent-lit twenty-four-hour coffee shop called Sugar's, where I ordered a latte, he a coffee, and we shared an unsatisfying cinnamon roll and people-watched during pauses in our conversation. It was during those pauses that I heard whispers from deep within myself that told me he was *the one*. This notion was also apparent in the steadiness of his gaze as I spoke, in the tranquil curve of this one curl resting just so on his forehead, in the way his face lit up when he found pleasure in something I said, in the ease of his name, Aaron.

In two early-morning hours, you can learn a lot about a person who's open enough to share himself. I listened as Aaron told me about his grandparents' wheat farm in North Dakota, which served as the setting of his childhood, and how he moved to Maine with his mother, spending his adolescence on the basketball courts with visions of Michael Jordan leaping in his mind. He told me he was a dog trainer who longed to make films and to have horses of his own someday. As he spoke effortlessly about the details of his life, I wondered if it really was that simple to tell your story. It took effort for

me to talk to strangers, even more to men. I self-consciously traded similar details that matched the weight of intimacy he was clearly aiming to build with me. I told Aaron that I was from Hawaii and had moved to New York four years ago for graduate school. I told him I got paid to write about celebrities and that when I grew up I wanted to write stories that matter.

“What do you mean by *matter*?”

I said I didn’t know.

“Yes you do,” he said, sipping his coffee and lifting a brow. He was challenging me. He saw beyond the pretty, which I had relied on during many first meetings with guys, aiming to remain a mystery, to remain unseen because being prettily invisible allowed me safety. His cocked brow signaled that he wouldn’t be afraid to know the real me.

“I write about famous people, about when their new movies come out, what they’re wearing on the red carpet, who they’re dating and having kids with,” I said. “Those things don’t *really* matter. Yeah, it’s fun, but there are stories I want to tell and don’t know how to yet.”

I felt I’d said too much in the comfort of late-night intimacy. Insecure, I shifted my focus away from Aaron and into the emptiness of my mug and onto the clock above the espresso machine, which pointed to a bit after three A.M. We decided to split a cab, which slowed across the street from his apartment, lit by the lights of La Esquina’s taco stand.

I stared at Aaron. I wanted him to kiss me. He leaned in and pressed his cheek to mine and whispered good night in my ear. As the taxi pulled away, I watched his boots stomp across Kenmare Street and soon read his text: “You’re a complete pleasure.”

I had yearned for true love ever since my junior year of high school, when I read *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in Mrs. Chun’s English class. Zora Neale Hurston wrote that Janie’s “soul crawled

out from its hiding place” when she met Tea Cake. I wanted to come out of my hiding place. I wanted a love that would open me up to the world and to myself. I wanted my own Tea Cake who wanted all of me. I draped myself in all of these expectations when I arrived for my first date with Aaron a week after our rendezvous at the coffee shop.

I spotted him through the windows of the New Museum, all six-two of him. He wore a black T-shirt, jeans, and rustic brown boots, which reminded me of North Dakota and horses and steadiness. The skin of my armpits stuck to my leather jacket’s lining as we leaned in, our cheeks reconnecting. “Shall we?” he said, flashing the tickets to the exhibit.

The first floor acted as an icebreaker. I told him I didn’t care for supermodern art, whatever that meant, arguing that displaying the contents of a woman’s purse was not art. He smirked as I spouted my opinions about the exhibit, which included a woman sleeping on an all-white bed, a “performance” that drew a crowd. I giggled inappropriately at the sight of intent onlookers tuned in to this unmoving, sticky-haired blonde. After a couple of glares from fellow museumgoers, we excused ourselves to the second floor.

In the stairwell, Aaron grabbed my waist. I was standing two steps ahead of him. “I think it’s time we kissed,” he said.

It was an invitation, one that didn’t fit my itinerary for our date. I imagined that he’d kiss me when he said good-bye, under the glowing gaze of the moon and my neighbor’s twinkling lights and the sound of the city cheering us on. Not in the daylight with these brighter-than-white walls and the reflective metal rails. It was too sterile, too open, too early.

When I looked around to see if anyone was there to witness this impending kiss, Aaron laughed at me. I must’ve seemed about thirteen, like a girl contemplating taking a drag from a friend’s cigarette.

I leaned forward, placing my lips to the heat of his. We fit, the cleft of our mouths meeting and the pressure of his deep pink lips against mine.

"Now that that's out of the way, I can concentrate on what you're saying," he said, smirking. His charm threw me, and immediately I wondered if he had a girlfriend at home, because there was no way this man was available. I didn't know how to be truly happy. I had to cope with it by dismissing it, by forecasting its inevitable end. My belief system operated on the notion that the good things in my life were a universal hiccup where doom surely loomed. Happiness was fleeting and accidental; goodness wasn't in the cards for a girl like me.

Video installations boomed on the next floor, allowing me to work through my awkwardness about the kiss during the final pieces of the exhibit. I squeezed my right hand into my left, my lifelong tell of nervousness, the same way I would when Dad focused on me as I searched for an answer to one of his probing questions. I felt out of control, as if I had crossed a threshold into fast-forward, no-turning-back closeness with Aaron. Getting close meant intimacy, and intimacy meant revelations. Sensing my discomfort, Aaron suggested we take a walk.

We headed west on the movie-set-ready blocks of Bleecker Street as the sun descended over this second island that I call home. Girls in printed frocks and summer maxis passed us, making me feel even more out of place in my leather jacket on this spring day.

"Let's play a game," Aaron said after a quiet couple of blocks. "We'll ask each other questions back and forth. The only rule is that you have to answer the question. Wanna go first?"

My first question for him was the one I'd been asking myself since we met: "What are you afraid of?"

It didn't take him but a few seconds to answer. "You," he said, looking down at the gum-spotted pavement. "Because I told myself I

would commit this year to me, not a girl, not a relationship. See, I'm a relationship guy."

Hearing him say that being in a relationship was part of his identity, in an age when men were believed to be afraid of commitment, had me feeling like I was in an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. This was not what years of watching Carrie Bradshaw skip around the city had taught me.

"I'm most comfortable in relationships," he continued, "but they distract me from myself. So my answer is simple: I'm afraid of you because I'll break my commitment to myself."

I was taken aback by his openness, which a part of me, from the world I'd grown up in, received as weakness. Aaron seemed available to the world because he knew, somewhere deep within himself, that the world was available to him. He probably never had to fight for anything, I thought. He probably had people in his life who listened to him, who waited with a grilled cheese sandwich on the table when he got home from school. He probably had *that* kind of childhood on the farm.

While I stood in judgment of a life I never had, the pressure of the date, of the kiss, of what was to come, left me. I didn't have to say anything about my past, I assured myself, because he didn't even want a relationship.

Then he took my hand, placing my fingers in between his. "Okay, it's my turn," he said. "And I'm going to steal your question."

*I'm afraid you won't love me once you know me*, I wanted to say. Instead I led with another truth: "I'm afraid of getting too close to anybody."

We stayed in each other's company until dinnertime, when we kissed and cuddled to the sounds of Portuguese lyrics at a Brazilian restaurant, the one where he said, *I see the little girl in you*. I wished I could see her. She didn't have the chance to just be, to frolic, to play.

She was the wrong kind of girl. I let him gaze at her and knew that this night was the beginning of love; I knew right then that he saw me like no one had before, and there was no turning back from this kind of closeness. I let him see that vulnerable, wide-eyed girl inside me, and I kissed him until the dusty stained-glass lantern dimmed to darkness and the soft samba melodies silenced.

We said good night for the second time on the corner of East Fourth Street and Bowery after he showed me how to salsa and I giggled while moving my hips. The pressure of his hand on the small of my back told me it was okay to let him lead me.

In the coming weeks, Aaron and I took a nighttime stroll through Central Park; heard my intellectual girl-crush, Zadie Smith, talk about writing at my alma mater, New York University; licked ice cream cones outside Lincoln Center; saw a bad romcom during the Tribeca Film Festival; and had our first sleepover.

When Aaron arrived at my place—a ground-floor studio fitting my full-size bed, desk, and TV—he came bearing gifts: *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron and two red tension balls. "I figure they'll help you relax and write," he said.

We watched my favorite relationship movie, *The Way We Were*, and discussed my love of Katie and my longing to be with someone who'd push me as much as Katie pushed Hubbell. Eventually, we kissed our way into my bed, and these kisses were freedom kisses— uninhibited by my self-conscious, overthinking tendencies. We gradually bared our bodies to each other, with my legs spread, my body yielding to him. He touched me like I had never been touched before, and I trusted him to see me. Just as I let my guard down, I put it back up, like a reflex, and he returned to the pillow beside me.

After a moment's pause, I studied his face: His eyelashes crowded the edges of his lids, creating a sweeping, almost epic frame on his

knowing brown eyes. I wondered if this man next to me, the one I had let touch, taste, and smell me, was ready to really know me. What does it mean to truly know someone, to claim that you're ready, ready to love a human being, not just a sketch of all your fantasies come to life? I wanted him to see *me*. My internal utterances must've manifested themselves into movable energy, because he smiled, widening the scar beneath his right eye like a pencil mark I would make in a book to note something significant. I moved my middle and index fingers across the jagged line.

"I got that when I was twelve or thirteen," he said, reaching back two decades to tell me a story about a boy running away from someone without care or caution. He'd snagged his face on a low-lying tree branch. The remnant of that carefree moment was forever on his face. "You know, I've never told anyone that before," Aaron said, traveling back to bed from that North Dakota emergency room.

I felt privileged but wondered why he'd chosen to tell me, out of all the people he'd known in his life, all the people he had loved and those he thought he had loved. Why was I worthy? And wasn't that the question I'd asked myself the entire time: *Why me? Why did you choose me in that bar? Why did you take me to that coffee shop and not just fuck me and discard me? Why did you tell me in dozens of little ways that I am special?*

He couldn't answer those questions because he didn't really know me, just like I did not really know him. But he was trying to be known, offering many of his life's stories and memories since our meeting. It's in these moments, in bed, in the dark, when you share and create new memories, that a relationship is built. I was holding on to everything I had not to be fully known; if he knew me, then this would end. The mere thought of it ending overwhelmed me, and he saw it, using his fingers to wipe away my tears.

Days later, I listened to a message from Aaron: "Hey, just calling to see what you're up to tonight. Nothing? Great. Come over. I want to talk to you."

My stomach ached when I heard the message. I felt past the lightness of his message to its weight. His call was in reaction to my crying in bed. I scolded myself for being vulnerable in front of him. Something in his voice told me that he knew. He *had* to know.

When I arrived at his apartment—a three-bedroom share without a living room—I sat on his bed as he closed the door behind him. Aaron's bedroom was a ten-by-ten space, softly lit by a lantern that illuminated remnants from our three-week courtship: a flyer from the exhibit; two pairs of movie stubs; and a photo of us from one of our dates. In it, my curls were a harsh yellow, shocked as a result of the previous day's highlighting session. Despite the frizz, I appeared pleased standing next to Aaron, who looked just over the photographer's shoulder. "You make a perfect pair," the man had said after fanning our Polaroid to dry. I remember Aaron thanking me with a kiss for indulging him in the touristy act.

Now I placed one of his pillows between my legs to shield myself. I knew from his expression that I was the one who was going to talk tonight. I looked into his eyes one last time and saw that he was anxious: He didn't sit down in his own room. I realized then that he had something to lose, too, with what I had to say. There was a dream in him that could be wrecked by my revelation.

I had presented Aaron a distorted me, and I couldn't give him me while wrapped in secrets—stories I've never told. They trap you, and you become so wound up in your own story, in the pain inflicted on you in the past that you've worked hard to keep at bay, and the people and actions and all the things you've been running away from, that you don't know what to believe anymore. Most important, you lose touch with yourself: The self you know, the you deep inside, is

obscured by a stack of untold stories. And I had been groomed to believe that they were all I had in this world, and the keeping of them was vital to my survival.

I felt I had endured enough. From some cavernous place, I reached inside myself and grabbed the courage to take a long trip back to a place I never thought I'd revisit. I took a deep breath and exhaled. "I have to tell you something."



NEW YORK, 2009

An unbearable silence draped over me as I clutched Aaron's pillow, the only thing I felt would ever embrace me in his room. Aaron stood in front of me, tall, immovable, processing all I had told him about my journey. I had to stop myself from filling the void between us, from reaching out to him, from begging him to love me. I wasn't sure of anything but the fact that I was no longer merely the veneer I had cautiously constructed since leaving Hawaii for New York. I could no longer maintain the shiny, untarnished, unattainable facade of that dream girl, the mixed one with the golden skin and curls and wide smile, the one wielding a master's degree and an enviable job.

In mere moments, through the intimate act of storytelling, I'd shattered that shell and replaced it with the truth, and I witnessed Aaron's awakening to the reality of me. We were two people facing ourselves and each other, not sure what the future held. Those silent seconds after my mouth stopped moving, I didn't know if he saw me in his future, and that uncertainty hurt and gave me an overwhelming sense of premature loss.

I thought about Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, about that evening on her back porch when she sat in the darkness and told her best friend, Pheoby, her life story. She talked about the pear tree blossoms, about kissing Johnny Taylor over Nanny's gate, about being forced to marry old Mr. Killicks, about running away with Jody and then Tea Cake, about experiencing and burying soul-crawling love. Like Janie, I didn't want to meditate on the horizon; I wanted to conquer it, wrap it around me like a shawl. Like Janie, I wanted to be fully known, and I had finally told my story to someone I deeply felt for.

His brown eyes were flung wide open, looking at me in all my bare honesty. Then Aaron stepped toward his bed and parted his lips. "Can I hug you?" he asked, resting one of his knees on the foot of the bed.

I rose to my knees as he leaned toward me, and I fell into his arms, exhaled heavily, and cried. For the first time in my life, I was recognized in totality. Not in spite of my experiences but because of my experiences. Aaron embraced me, though I knew, with his smooth, solid, sunburned arms surrounding me, that my challenge would be embracing myself. How could I expect this man to love me when I didn't know what it meant to accept, embrace, and love myself?

When I left Aaron's arms, I flung myself onto the streets of downtown Manhattan, the home of my choice, the place I had entered nearly five years before, representing a new beginning. After graduating from the University of Hawai'i in 2005 with a degree in fashion and media studies, I moved to the East Village, where I roomed with two other New York University grad students, met new friends at magazine internships, tipsily kissed boys on St. Mark's, and cautiously kept my distance from people. Detachment allowed me to know people on my terms.

I had been openly trans from the ages of fifteen to twenty-two, in the midst of finding who I was and revealing my findings to my loved

ones and the community I grew up in. I went to bars in Honolulu with girlfriends and flirted with guys. There were numerous times when the man I was dancing with would be tapped on his shoulder or pulled away. He would return with a look of confusion, detection, or disgust, as if he had lost something, as if he had been blind to something, as if he were the only person in that bar who didn't know. The moment of forced disclosure is a hostile one to experience, one in which many trans women, even those who have the conditional privilege of "passing" that I have, can be victim to violence and exiling. In Hawaii, my home, disclosure was routinely stripped from me. People would take it from me as if it were their duty to tell the guy I was flirting with that I was trans and therefore should be avoided. It's these societal aggressions that force trans women to live in chosen silence and darkness, to internalize the shame, misconceptions, stigma, and trauma attached to being a different kind of woman.

No one in New York City knew I was trans because I chose not to lead with that fact. It was the first time in my young life when I was able to be just another twenty-two-year-old living in the big city, shedding the image that my hometown had assigned me. E. B. White, in his love letter "Here Is New York," wrote that it is the New York of "the young girl arriving from a small town . . . to escape the indignity of being observed by her neighbors" who gives the city "its incomparable achievements." For me, New York was "the city of final destination, the city that is a goal," and my goal was independence.

In New York, I had the freedom to declare who I was, discover who I wanted to be, and choose who I wanted to invite into my life. It was freeing to be another girl in the crowd, enjoying and experiencing life. I was able to learn about storytelling from some of the nation's best journalists at NYU. I nabbed internships at magazines I had torn pages from growing up and rubbed elbows with editors whose letters I had read every month for as long as I could remem-

ber. I earned my master's degree and landed a coveted online position at *People* magazine.

My past wasn't something I thought of in my early twenties because I'd fought hard to be in the present I created. I *chose*, because it was my decision to make, not to announce I was trans. My transness felt irrelevant to most of my informal, passing relationships. It was not something I discussed upon meeting someone. It was not my editor, my coworker, or my colleague's right to know that I had been born a boy. I also felt that if I told people I was trans, the hurdles that I would have to climb to get to where I yearned to be would become even more insurmountable. Being trans would become the focus of my existence, and I would be forced to fight the images cataloged in people's minds about trans people. Trying every day to combat preconceived ideas and stereotypes learned from popular culture was not on my priority list at the time. I was trying to survive, in addition to figuring myself out and unpacking who I was beyond the gender stuff.

This took work that involved me excavating what it meant to me to be *me*, to be a multiracial trans woman, or at least the kind I embody: one who's most often read as a cis mixed black woman; one with no discernible accent reflecting my father's Texas twang or my mother's Hawaiian pidgin roots; one with an advanced degree, the kind of education that my teen-mom mother and sisters didn't have access to; one with large, curly hair called "good" by my father's sisters, even though the kids in Hawaii teased that it looked like *limu* from the bottom of the sea; one with skin brown enough to be called out but light enough to be deemed not *really* black; one who was taught to identify as black because that was visible and the world would judge me accordingly.

I was raised by my parents to be visibly black and raised myself to be a visible woman. It took me years to stand firmly at the inter-

section of blackness and womanhood, a collage of my lived experiences, media, pop culture, and art. I had come to blackness through Clair Huxtable's swift didactic monologues in reruns of *The Cosby Show*; through the anger I felt when I was prettily invisible in clubs in New York's Meatpacking District, where guys looked through me in search of white girls; through the uh-oh dance in Beyoncé's "Crazy in Love"; through the sounds of bottle-popping douches who called me "exotic" and said "You're really pretty for a black girl!" and "I'm usually not attracted to black women"; through the revolutionary words of Audre Lorde; through the vision of Michelle Obama's fist bump; through the consensus of the black-girl interns who said I was different because "You're the right amount of black," the kind white woman editors aren't intimidated to work with; through the raw brilliance of *This Bridge Called My Back*; through the beauty of Marsha P. Johnson's flowers, smile, and S.T.A.R.

I am aware that identifying with what people see versus what's authentic, meaning who I actually am, involves erasure of parts of myself, my history, my people, my experiences. Living by other people's definitions and perceptions shrinks us to shells of ourselves, rather than complex people embodying multiple identities. I am a trans woman of color, and that identity has enabled me to be truer to myself, offering me an anchor from which I can uplift my visible blackness, my often invisible trans womanhood, my little-talked-about native Hawaiian heritage, and the many iterations of womanhood they combine.

When I think of identity, I think of our bodies and souls and the influences of family, culture, and community—the ingredients that make us. James Baldwin describes identity as "the garment with which one covers the nakedness of the self." The garment should be worn "loose," he says, so we can always feel our nakedness: "This trust in one's nakedness is all that gives one the power to change one's

robes." I'm still journeying toward that place where I'm comfortable in this nakedness, standing firmly in my interlocking identities.

Like identity, my not-so-relationship with Aaron was a complicated matter that was finding its way. Aaron refused to commit to me, and I refused to let him go. That romantic, dizzying feeling of infatuation was no longer in his belly after I told him I was trans. Those fleeting, fluttery feelings in mine were replaced by something deeper, something resembling love. The unevenness of our feelings filled me with insecurities. I told Aaron several times that I felt demoted, and each time he told me, "I never not want you in my life."

I trusted Aaron with my vulnerabilities because of his reaction that night in his bedroom. He showed himself to me as well, validating every instinct I had about him. Aaron recognized that opening up to him must've been difficult, but it was difficult for him to think about what was next because he didn't even think that my being trans was a possibility. His initial instinct was to comfort me.

"It wasn't about *me* and how *I* felt," Aaron said, reflecting on his reaction. "It took me a while to process all of it, but immediately I wanted you to know that there was nothing wrong with you and that I valued what you shared with me."

Aaron told me that he hadn't internalized what I'd said. My story didn't make him question his gender or sexuality, an assumption many people think must have been difficult for Aaron, a cis heterosexual man. My identity as a trans woman didn't make him doubt his manhood or my womanhood. He said it actually made him feel closer to me and made him see the parallels in our journeys, specifically with the isolation of having grown up visibly different, the only black kid in rural North Dakota and Maine.

"I was out there all alone, questioning who I was and what it all meant at a young age," Aaron explained. "Being different, I was forced to look at the world differently, and I constantly questioned who I

was. By the time you opened up to me, I was fully formed, if that makes sense. There were no more questions about my identity, about who I was." He did admit one thing: "I no longer look at people the same way anymore. You taught me to question those assumptions I made about people every day."

I continued to open up to Aaron, telling him other pieces of my story over those months throughout which we watched movies, chatted about them over coffee and brunch, attended block and housewarming parties, all the motions of a couple. He also opened up to me, telling me that my revelations had forced him to focus on his own struggles. He wondered why he'd fallen so quickly for someone he didn't know, why it was so easy for him to sacrifice his dreams for a woman, why he hadn't been single since he was fifteen. He returned to the promise he had made to commit to himself, not to a woman or a relationship.

Though he made room for me, Aaron's inconsistencies were consistent, and they supported the pit of dread in my belly that I was not worthy of love. His texts and calls and dates were intermittent. We'd spend a long weekend together here and there, growing closer, having sex, getting to know each other more intimately. I told him that I wanted to be brave enough to tell my story someday, and he encouraged me to retrace the steps I'd taken over a decade ago. He held me accountable to my truth, suggesting that I write down my story for myself and open up to those closest to me in New York.

One of the first people I invited into my life was my best friend, Mai. She was the woman who hired me at People.com, despite an HR rep's "professional" assessment of me as an entitled, incapable diva, which Mai attributed to my looks. Mai and I bonded over the fact that we were women of color in corporate America, over a silly devotion to *The Hills*, and over a mutual love of vintage shopping. Most important, we were both on the rebound, having left our starter relationships, longing for partnership.

There were moments of deep intimacy and sharing during our three-year friendship when I felt myself pulling back, withholding details that would reveal me. I remember that evening after her thirtieth birthday when we were placing her clothes (including a Minnie Mouse costume that still cracks me up), DVDs, books, and photos in cardboard boxes. She was sitting on the hardwood floor in gray sweatpants, weeping over leaving a man who was no longer good for her. "I don't know if I can do this," she said. "I don't know if I'm strong enough to do this on my own."

"You're not alone," I said, writing "sweaters" in bold print on a cardboard box with a black Sharpie.

"I know I have you, but I don't know if I can do this."

"You *will* do this," I assured her.

"How do you know?" she asked.

My heart was open, and I was ready to bare myself to her, to tell her that I knew she could do this alone because I once was a scared girl afraid of the unknown, of stepping out on her own. I pulled myself back and protectively squashed my instinct to share with her because I was too afraid that if I told her, she would think of me differently. Instead, I hugged her, grabbed another box, and filled our glasses with cabernet. A year later, we were in different places, and our friendship had grown constant, reliable, sisterly. Unlike when I was a teenager, I knew I didn't have to do it all alone. I had someone I could rely on, to share my anguish over the grayness of my relationship with Aaron. I called Mai wracked with fear. "I need you to know that I've wanted to share something with you many times but was scared," I told her over the phone.

"Janet," Mai started in her ever assuring way, "there's nothing you could do that would make me not love you."

"You know how you're always teasing me that you don't know why Aaron wouldn't want to be with me, that he's idiotic and all that stuff?"

"Yeah," she said.

"Well, he doesn't want to be with me mostly because of my past," I said.

After I told Mai my story, she yelled at me for scaring her: "You acted as if you murdered someone!" When we met that evening for dinner, she hugged me, acted just as silly as she normally did, and reiterated that Aaron was still idiotic not to be with me. Her friendship buoyed me as I spoke the truths I'd silenced long ago.

I lived in a world that told me in big and small ways every day that who I knew myself to be was invalid. I blossomed in spite of a society that didn't offer me a single image of a girl who happened to be born a boy, who was thriving in the world, off the streets, away from some man's wallet, basking in the reality of her dreams. As I typed away every morning in my bedroom before going to my office cubicle, I broke down those walls of shame about being a different kind of woman. I grew more confident, stronger, realizing that I deserved love.

After eighth months of limbo, I woke up at one A.M. on a cold February 2010 night to a text from Aaron: "Are you up? I can't take it anymore. Yes, I've been drinking but I'm not drunk. I'm just outside your apartment."

When I buzzed him in, he looked at me with puffy red eyes. He looked as tired and weary as I felt. We had a strong bond, a deep friendship that we had built over those months since I met him on that Lower East Side dance floor, since splitting that cinnamon roll, since he told me he wanted horses someday. But I felt myself giving up on any idea of there being an us beyond friendship. I thought that my being trans was a deal breaker, and I was growing to accept that.

"You know I love you, right?" he asked straight out.

I nodded, taking it as a final answer, a rejection of all my hopes for us. I didn't speak or expound on what we could be or rebut what I saw

as his white flag of surrender. I'd been there, done that, with him. My love was proven, and I had nothing left to prove. My love was known, I was known.

"I left my apartment hours ago in search of something. I don't know what it was," he said. "So I went to one bar after another and ended up on your street."

I remained quiet, looking at him as we walked into my bedroom.

"As I stood on your street, I realized that, like that night when we met, I left my place looking for you. I've always wanted you, to be right here with you, Janet," he said.

I held my tears back, stubborn. I had cried too many times over him, over not getting a text or a call, over my unanswered invitations to hang out. I remained quiet.

Lying beside me in my bed, he said, "I'm tired."

I knew that his declaration of being tired was the moment I'd been waiting for ever since I had opened up to him. I knew this was our moment, the one that we'd remember forever, the one when we'd become that "me and you against the world" couple he once predicted we'd be.

"Make room for me," I pleaded as his head rested on my chest.

"Okay."

We moved in together in the spring, he met my family in November and I met his in December, and by the end of that year Aaron was beside me as I smiled from that stoop fronting Tompkins Square Park for my *Marie Claire* photo shoot, and he urged me from behind his camera to open my heart in my "It Gets Better" video. He was there with his camera, documenting my reunion with Wendi in late 2011 when she relocated to New York City for her makeup career. It was the first time she and I were in the same city since I was in college. Aaron and the friendship and love and partnership that we've built became my foundation, a platform that has fortified my own sense of

self, giving me the strength to step out of silence and come forward fully as my own woman. I've found that Audre Lorde was indeed right when she wrote, "That visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength."

Speaking up about my experiences continues to be an incredibly vulnerable experience. I feel I am out there on my own, grappling with and sharing my truth. That vulnerability has also enabled me to connect to other women and plug into a wider network of narratives on our varying paths to womanhood. I have learned through the process of storytelling and sharing that we all come from various walks of life, and that doesn't make any of us less valid.

My assignment at birth is only one facet of my identity, one that I am no longer invested in concealing. Acknowledging this fact and how it has shaped my understanding of self has given me the power to challenge the ways in which we judge, discriminate, and stigmatize women based on bodily differences. The media's insatiable appetite for transsexual women's bodies contributes to the systematic othering of trans women as modern-day freak shows, portrayals that validate and feed society's dismissal and dehumanization of trans women. The U.S. media's shallow lens dates back to 1952, when Christine Jorgensen became the media's first "sex change" darling, breaking barriers and setting the tone for how our stories are told. These stories, though vital to culture change and our own sense of recognition, rarely report on the barriers that make it nearly impossible for trans women, specifically those of color and those from low-income communities, to lead thriving lives. They're tried-and-true transition stories tailored to the cis gaze. What I want people to realize is that "transitioning" is not the end of the journey. Yes, it's an integral part of revealing who we are to ourselves and the world, but there's much life afterward. These stories earn us visibility but fail at reporting on what our lives are like

beyond our bodies, hormones, surgeries, birth names, and before-and-after photos.

Challenging the media tropes has been the most difficult part of sharing my story. On the one hand, there are through lines, common elements in our journeys as trans women, that are undeniable. At the same time, plugging people into the "transition" narrative (which I have been subjected to) erases the nuance of experience, the murkiness of identity, and the undeniable influence of race, class, and gender. It's no coincidence that the genre of memoir from trans people has been dominated by those with access, mainly white trans men and women, and these types of disparities greeted me head-on when I stepped forward publicly.

Initially, I was embraced by the stakeholders of the mainstream LGBT movement. I quickly noticed that despite the unifying acronym, the people at the table often did not reflect me or my community. These spaces and the conversations were dominated by men, specifically upper-middle-class white cis gay men. Women, people of color, trans folks, and especially folks who carried multiple identities were all but absent. I was grateful for the invitation but unfilled by the company. This was my political awakening.

I was tasked with speaking out about these glaring disparities, about how those with the most access within the movement set the agenda, contribute to the skewed media portrait, and overwhelmingly fail at funneling resources to those most marginalized. My awakening pushed me to be more vocal about these issues, prompting uncomfortable but necessary conversations about the movement privileging middle- and upper-class cis gay and lesbian rights over the daily access issues plaguing low-income queer and trans youth and LGBT people of color, communities that carry interlocking identities that are not mutually exclusive, that make them all the more

vulnerable to poverty, homelessness, unemployment, HIV/AIDs, hyper-criminalization, violence, and so much more.

One of the reasons the gay rights movement has been successful is its urging that gays and lesbians everywhere, no matter their age, color, or wealth, come out of the closet. This widespread visibility has shifted culture and challenged misconceptions. People often transpose the coming-out experience on me, asking how it felt to be in the closet, to have been stealth. These questions have always puzzled me. Unlike sexuality, gender is visible. I never hid my gender. Every day that I stepped out into the sunlight, unapologetically femme, I was a visible woman. People assume that I was in the closet because I didn't disclose that I was assigned male at birth.

What people are really asking is "Why didn't you correct people when they perceived you as a *real* woman?" Frankly, I'm not responsible for other people's perceptions and what they consider real or fake. We must abolish the entitlement that deludes us into believing that we have the right to make assumptions about people's identities and project those assumptions onto their genders and bodies.

It is not a woman's duty to disclose that she's trans to every person she meets. This is not safe for a myriad of reasons. We must shift the burden of coming out from trans women, and accusing them of hiding or lying, and focus on why it is unsafe for women to be trans.

For a while I have had the privilege of being able to choose with whom I share my story and whether disclosure is necessary. I have based this decision on the intimacy, closeness, and longevity of the relationship. As for dating, rarely was I open with any guy the first time we met. I felt it wasn't his right to know that I was assigned male at birth. It was often irrelevant to our interaction. Not every date or hookup was worthy of me or my story. Some of those dates were best suited to drinks or dinner and maybe even my bed.

I've experienced varying levels of disclosure throughout my life. At thirteen, I told Wendi I was a girl. At fifteen, I told my mother and my siblings to call me Janet. At twenty-six, I told Aaron that I was a different kind of woman. At twenty-eight, I shed my anonymity in *Marie Claire* because I wanted to disclose an aspect of my identity that I felt was widely misunderstood, and often invisible. That catalytic piece moved people to think differently, disrupting the portrait of womanhood. It was the pivot in which I decided to invite the world into my life, when I chose to acknowledge that though you may not perceive me as trans, I am trans, and being trans—as is being black, Hawaiian, young, and a woman—is an integral part of my experience, one that I have no investment in erasing.

All of these parts of myself coexist in *my* body, a representation of evolution and migration and truth. My body carries within its frame beauty and agony, certainty and murkiness, loathing and love. And I've learned to accept it, as is. For so much of my life, I wished into the dark to be someone else, some elusive ideal that represented possibility and contentment.

I was steadily reaching in the dark across a chasm that separated who I was and who I thought I should be. Somewhere along the way, I grew weary of grasping at possible selves, just out of reach. So I put my arms down and wrapped them around me. I began healing by embracing myself through the foreboding darkness until the sunrise shone on my face. Eventually, I emerged, and surrendered to the brilliance, discovering truth, beauty, and peace that was already mine.

## Acknowledgments

This book would not be possible without my parents, who gave me life and shared theirs with me. I'm equally grateful to my siblings, Chad, Cheraine, Cori, and Jeff. Without your love, there would be no me.

Aaron, my compassionate first reader, urged me to tap into myself and share my journey. He also ensured that I ate, scheduled TV breaks, and had someone to yell at when I was insecure and stressed. Without his care, this book would not be here.

My best friends, Mai and Wendi, were pivotal in helping me discover myself as a girl and woman. I love you. I was also blessed to encounter Ed, who first brought me to New York City, and Zach, who selflessly ensured I stayed. The companionship of Kristina, Nary, and Charlise made my first years in New York *everything*.

Many thanks to Farrington High School for welcoming me and bringing these critical people into my life: Mrs. Jean Chun, who introduced me to Zora Neale Hurston and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*;