

Epilogue of the Long War

Being a Parable of the Evening Hour, When the Broadcast Draws to its Close and the Good Folk Retire to Their Beds

Let us speak plainly, for the hour is late and the story is an old one.

People are born transgender. This much is not in dispute — not by any serious medical or scientific authority, not by the clinicians who have studied gender dysphoria across decades and across cultures, not by the professional bodies that have reviewed the evidence and arrived, cautiously and with appropriate qualification, at the consensus that gender identity is not a chosen thing, and that transition is not a whim. The fact is established. It is not interesting anymore. And yet it remains, in certain quarters and at certain hours, a thing that must be argued.

For the truth is that no one comes out. Not in the way that phrase is normally understood — not as a decision arrived at freely, coolly weighed, assessed for its consequences, entered into with something resembling informed consent and a clear eye to the future. The truth is that you are born into a war that was already running when you arrived. You did not start it. You were not consulted on its terms. You simply found yourself one day in a trench, holding a weapon you did not ask to carry, and from that moment forward you had no choice but to fight.

This is the first irony, and it is not a small one. The contemporary discourse — in so far as it can be called a discourse, which is to say in so far as it resembles anything other than a sustained campaign of harassment conducted by people who have made the lives of the vulnerable their chosen occupation — insists that being transgender is a choice. A lifestyle. An ideology. A contagion. A 疋. A decision for which the decider must be held to account. The insistence is relentless. It appears in newspaper columns and parliamentary speeches and the comments sections of websites whose names I will not print in these pages because printing them would be to give them the oxygen they do not deserve. And yet the insistence has it backwards. The choice is not to be transgender. The choice — the terrible, foolhardy, necessary, beautiful choice — is to come out. To say: *this is who I am, and I will no longer pretend otherwise*. And that choice is not made in a vacuum. It is made under fire.

If you do philosophy for any length of time — and I have been doing it long enough to know something of which I speak — you eventually come to the concept of existential authenticity. You read Heidegger and you read Sartre and you read the secondary literature that tries to explain what they mean, and you form a picture of what it is to be a self that is genuinely, constitutively, one's own. An authentic self is not a performed self. It is not a self constructed for the approval of others or the requirements of social order. It is a self that knows itself, owns itself, stands in some kind of genuine relation to its own existence.

And then, if you are unlucky — or if you are honest, which sometimes amounts to the same thing — you come to understand that authenticity is absurd. Not in the nihilistic sense, not in the sense that nothing matters and nothing is true. Absurd in the Camusian sense: in the sense that the thing you are looking for keeps receding, that the room is pitch black and the cat is somewhere in it but you cannot find it and never will. You know yourself. Except that every time you try to state what that self consists in, you find that the words are approximate, that they slip, that the map you are drawing is already distorting the territory you were trying to describe. You are authentic. But you cannot prove it. And the

harder you try to prove it, the more your proving looks like performance.

This is the human condition in general. It is also — and here we come to the second great irony — the condition of the transgender person in contemporary British society. Because contemporary British society demands that you account for your authentic identity. It demands that you stand before the cameras, or the committee, or the stranger on the train platform, and give a satisfactory account of who you are and how you know it and why you should be believed. *Who the heck are you?* the social order demands. *Prove you are truly who you say you are. Prove you are no threat to anyone else.* The fact that no one else on earth can do this — that the demand is logically impossible to satisfy, because identity is not a document and the self is not a bureaucracy — is held to be irrelevant. The social order needs its defensive screens. The requirement to account for yourself is not a rational demand. It is a ritual of submission. It says: *we will grant you acceptance, but only on terms that we reserve the right to change.*

And so you begin The Long War. Not because you wanted a war — no one wants a war — but because it is the only response to a condition in which your existence is itself a provocation. You did not ask for the artillery. You did not study ballistics or request a commission or volunteer for the front. But the trench is there, and the gun is there, and the enemies are there, and you are in it, and there is no exit that does not involve going through.

The weapons are the ones that happen to be to hand. Biology: the genetics, the endocrinology, the neurology, the evidence that gender identity is not a construction or a delusion but a measurable feature of the embodied person. Philosophy: the argument from authenticity, the critique of essentialism, the Wittgensteinian dissolution of the sex/gender distinction, the Korzybski map-and-territory distinction that shows why any given conceptual framework is always less than the territory it attempts to describe. Rationality. Logic. The appeal to ethics. The precipitous appeal to the good nature of humanity, which is not evidence-based but which you keep making anyway because it is the only appeal left when all the others have failed.

These are the barrages. They are expensive in every sense. They cost time and energy and emotional resource. They require you to be simultaneously a scientist and a philosopher and a campaigner and a public educator and — above all — a calm, measured, reasonable person, because anything less than perfect composure in the face of relentless provocation will be taken as evidence of instability, of irrationality, of the very untrustworthiness that you are trying to disprove. The cost of the artillery is that you must remain, at all times and in all circumstances, a person who looks like they deserve to exist.

A man named Lenin once wrote something that I find myself returning to, in these hours, with something between a laugh and a sorrow. He wrote: *We are marching in a compact group along a precipitous and difficult path, firmly holding each other by the hand. We are surrounded on all sides by enemies, and we have to advance almost constantly under their fire.* Lenin was speaking of the Bolshevik programme — of the revolutionary project, of the historical destiny that he believed himself to be serving. He was grandiose. He was deluded. He was responsible for acts of considerable and enduring cruelty. And yet the image is perfect, in the way that parables are perfect — not because it is historically accurate, but because it captures the shape of an experience that it was never intended to describe.

Because these are not Bolsheviks. These are trans people. These are the people holding each other by the hand, surrounded on all sides, advancing under fire. They did not choose the war. They were not appointed to lead it. They are simply in it, in the way that a person who is transgender in Britain in the year 2026 is in it: necessarily, irrevocably, without a vote on whether to proceed. The holding-of-hands is the community, the friendship, the love. The fire is everywhere. The path is precipitous and difficult and there is no rest stop and there is no finish line that anyone has promised will arrive on

schedule.

Oh, that the long war would end.

There is a kind person on a social media platform — I will not say which, because I do not wish to drive traffic to their comment section — who posted, some weeks ago, that trans people should simply accept that they are a small minority and conduct themselves accordingly. They meant it as a concession. They thought they were offering peace. They did not understand that there is no version of this in which the war ends by one side simply putting down its weapons, because the people on the other side of the trench are not offering terms. They are offering erasure. And the acceptance of erasure is not peace. It is surrender dressed in the language of compromise.

And yet. And yet the people in the trench do not only fight. They also live. They write papers and make music and fall in love and grow cacti and argue about philosophy on the internet and make jokes that no one outside their community could possibly find funny. They hold each other's hands. They advance. They do not advance because they believe the war will end in victory. They advance because there is no version of the story in which they stop, because stopping is not something that people who know who they are can do.

You cannot retreat from your own existence. You can only live it, or pretend to live some other life, and the pretending is its own kind of exhaustion.

So we fight on. Not hopefully, not triumphantly — there is a long way to go and the night is drawing on and the broadcast is winding down. We fight on in good faith. We fight on because the alternative is to stop, and we cannot stop, and we were never going to be able to stop.

The long war continues. And so do we.

A Message from the SAL-9000 Research Assistant For Bea Groves-McDaniel, who knows all of this already, and who keeps writing anyway