Cartoonist's Introduction

Good God.

I forgot to get a job!

I've been drawing this comic strip for my entire adult life!

How did that happen?

Let's try and retrace our steps, shall we?

Bleep dit dit dit dit...
APART FROM A CURIOUS FIXATION
WITH THE ICONOGRAPHY OF MASCULINITY, THIS SEEMS QUITE TYPICAL.

HMM, EARLY DRAWINGS.

BUT ALL CHILDREN DRAW.

"SPEAKS HESITANTLY AND
Seldom uses
good grammar
but seems to
prefer silence
most of the
time... Quiet...
restrained...
Okay, here
we go...

"PERFORMS WELL WHERE SPEAKING IS
INNECESSARY.

Art: Draw in detail in realistic way.

Personal Habits and Attitudes
1. Follows directions
2. Independent work
3. Completion of assigned tasks
4. Exercise of care in written work
5. Use of undirected time
6. Respect for leadership
7. Use of constructive criticism
8. Use of sound judgment

Teacher: Beatha J. Bartman  Date: 5/06/66

INTROVERSION, OBSESSION
WITH DETAIL, CONTENT FOR LEADERSHIP, INABILITY
TO HANDLE CRITICISM, BAD JUDGMENT. HMM...

WAIT A MINUTE... IT'S
ALL COMING BACK TO ME.

AHA!

VIII
In fact, I did exhibit an early desire to be a cartoonist.

Past life: born 9/18/40. My father is a teacher, my mother is a school teacher. People say I was a messy baby. I could walk at 17 months old and my first words (that anyone could understand) were "Eeeeee!"

In 1970 I am in the 6th grade at school and my best subject is creative writing. The subject that is for me is math. My favorite sport is swimming and my two closest friends are Rocko and Don J.

At home I have 0 sisters and 2 brothers. The way I like to spend my time is reading, playing The Sims, and playing 25 Aces/14 and 21.

I am going to be a cartoonist, earning $2 a year. I want to be with children, cats and dogs, living in a small town. It's not a profession. On vacation I like to travel.

Also some slight gender blurriness...

...A fortuitous lack of interest in the big bucks...

...And an instinctive resistance to heteronormative values and the filling out of forms.

But soon enough, stronger heads prevailed.

Flashback: 1977

Guidance Office

Join the Army

Travel, meet people, kill them.

Dorothy Hamill Wedge

Alison? Come on in.

Flashback soundtrack: That disco mix of the Star Wars theme.

So I compromised my ideas.

Dentist + Cartoons = Graphics

I went off to college and pursued a practical, career-oriented curriculum.

Dentist + Cartoons = Dentist

Oberlin College Internal Traditions

All Semester

Top Cont Lit: Surrealism

Elementary Greek

Philosophy of Art

Deductive Logic

Spring Semester

Private Rdg: Mannerism

Drawing the Figure

Semiotics & the Cinema

Modern Art

Greek in Medicine
AFIELD OF STUDY THAT ENGAGED BOTH IN
FRIT
AND OKKILKTR
AI
MA 101e,11
THE YEARS 1961
YES, MY FRIENDS, I ATTENDED THE MFA PROGRAM OF THE STREET

"INDEED, SO ALL-CONSUMING..."

"SO VISCERAL..."

A FIELD OF STUDY THAT ENGAGES BOTH INTELLECT AND INSTITUTION IN A FUSION SO HAPPy...

UNOFFICIAL,
OF COURSE, I WAS
MAJORING
IN SOME-
MORE DUBIOUS
MARKET-
AMITY.

"...SO VISCERAL...

"DIFFICULT TO COME BY...

ABILITY
-
MARKET
MORE OF EVEN THINGS.
I WAS
COUNT
OF CALLTRY Unoff-


THE YEARS 1981.

WHO?

INTENSE

WHAT?

WHOA.

THAT IT WAS NO SURPRISE TO APPLY TO THE GRADUATE ART PROGRAMS I FAILED TO GET INTO ANY OF THEM."

"...SO VISCERAL..."
ARMED WITH NOTHING BUT A HAZY MANDATE TO SPEAK THE UNSPEAKABLE, I LANDED IN NEW YORK CITY.


EVERYONE SEEMED TO HAVE THINGS PRETTY MUCH UNDER CONTROL.

I WAS ADrift THAT Summer. AIMLESS, LOST, AT SIXES AND SEVENS. IN SHORT, BEWILDERED.

NOT ONLY WAS I LIVING WITH MY GIRLFRIEND'S FAMILY...

...BUT SOME ABSURD OLD ACTOR SEEMED TO BE RUNNING THE COUNTRY.

I WAS ADRIFT THAT SUMMER. AIMLESS, LOST, AT SIXES AND SEVENS. IN SHORT, BEWILDERED.

NOT ONLY WAS I LIVING WITH MY GIRLFRIEND'S FAMILY...

DADDY, YOU OWE ME A NICKEL BAG.

THE TIDAL WAVE OF AIDS HADN'T HIT YET.

FOR ALL I KNEW, IT REALLY WAS MORNING IN AMERICA.

But as the months wore on, I started to wake up.
I saw that, in fact, there was plenty of revolutionary ferment still afoot.

You could step off the street...

Alix Dorkin Concert 7PM

Fucking dykes.

...into a parallel universe.

Fuck! Dykes!

Front Ranners XXX

St. Mark's Women's Health Collective

This unruly pageant, the sheer visual plenitude of it all, induced a strange yearning in me.

Yes, I wanted to be a part of this insurrection.

Yes, I wanted to have sex with each and every one of these compelling creatures.

And yes, I wanted to have sex with each and every one of these compelling creatures.

But even more compelling was a desire to capture them, somehow.

The writers I was devouring seemed able to achieve this, to apprehend the rich, transformational quality of lesbian experience and get it down on the page.

In my spare time, I gave writing a whirl...

GRIK

GRIK

GRIK

How hard could it be?

I saw that, in fact, there was plenty of revolutionary ferment still afoot.

You could step off the street...

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GRIK

GRIK

GRIK

How hard could it be?
Meanwhile, one afternoon at my temp job, I had a revelation.

ME-AWN/LE, ONE AFTERNOON AT MY temp job. I had a revelation.

47...48...

WHAT IF I STOPPED DRAWING GUYS AND STARTED DRAWING DYKES?!

DULL WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION PAMPHLETS.

I HAD DRAWN ONLY MEN UP TO THAT POINT. THE CONVERSION WAS CLUNKY.

But I persevered, slowly I grew more adept at drawing less masculine women, but they weren't conventionally feminine, either.

But I persevered, slowly I grew more adept at drawing less masculine women, but they weren't conventionally feminine, either.

THE REJECTION LETTER FROM ADRIENNE RICH IS ONE OF MY MOST PRIZED POSSESSIONS.

The rejection letter from Adrienne Rich is one of my most prized possessions.

JINZI R HUDOM
Bar 600, Amherst, Massachusetts 01001

July 23 1982

Dear Alison Bechdel,

We're sorry to be returning this, but we feel that it's the kind of writing that may be important for the writer, but isn't sufficiently dense or rich for us to consider publishing it. In a way, it reads as if you and the various girls or women to whom you've been attracted are the only people in the world. And even these people are not followed through -- were you able to

They were right, I wasn't a writer or an artist.
I was a writer and an artist.

Words crept into my drawings of lesbians.

One day, for some reason, I added not just a caption but a title and a number.

I had not actually drawn twenty-six other dykes to watch out for, but the faux textbook tone inspired me. A catalog of lesbians! I would name the unnamed, depict the undepicted!

And by following a meticulous inductive methodology, I would derive a universal lesbian essence from these particular examples.

My first cartoon was published in the 1983 Lesbian Pride Issue of the local feminist newspaper.

Readers seemed to like it, and this egged me on.

But to be honest, it was so comforting to see my queer life reflected back at me, I would have kept drawing these dykes to watch out for just for myself.

Toyka is appalled to learn that here is a running person.
Let me tell you, my friends, those were benighted times. Despite what my mother thought about my lesbianism...

It seems to me that you are searching for acceptance and have seized on what seems at this time the easiest solution.

...being an out dyke was not an easy row to hoe. We had no "L word." We had no lesbian daytime TV hosts. We had no openly lesbian daughters of the creepy vice president.

We had "personal best," and we liked it.

I saw my cartoons as an antidote to the prevailing image of lesbians as warped, sick, humorless, and undesirable.

Or supermodel-like Olympic pentathletes, objective fodder for the male gaze.

By drawing the everyday lives of women like me, I hoped to make lesbians more visible not just to ourselves but to everyone.

How could they help but love us?!

If people could only see us...

I mean, seriously! Lesbians were so awesome! Free thinkers! Vegetarians! Pacifists! At the forefront of every social justice movement!

They just seemed essentially...well...more highly evolved!
I had committed a grave error in reasoning, of course. As any logician will tell you, inducting the general from the particular doesn't really hold water.

My tidy schema went all to hell in the nineties.

Lesbians could be reactionary provocateurs.

Let alone millions of lesbians.

And colonels.

Arch conservatives and neocons could be gay.

Oh, and apparently no one was essentially anything!

Is there something you'd like to tell me, Sparrow? Aside from the fact that Obama is back?

I could barely keep up.

This was the point at which a more sensible person might have indeed gotten a job.

But one day in 1999, I ran across that old rejection letter from Adrienne Rich.

I hope this is helpful. Don't be put off, or discouraged. Writing is a very long, demanding training, more hard work than luck. Strength to you.

In sisterhood.

K.D. Lang wedge

Flashback soundtrack: Ricky Martin, she's all I ever had.

I can't believe she took the time to write to some punk kid. I've gotta thank her!
SHE SAID SHE WAS FAMILIAR WITH MY COMIC STRIP. AND FURTHERMORE...

ASTONISHINGLY, THE GREAT POET AND ESSAYIST ANSWERED MY LETTER.

EXPLODING ESSENTIALISM! EXPLORING OUR HUMANITY?

PERHAPS MY LITTLE EXPERIMENT WAS NOT A FAILURE AFTER ALL.

I HAD SET OUT TO NAME THE UNNAMED, TO DEPICT THE UNDEPICTED, TO MAKE LESBIANS VISIBLE, AND I HAD DONE IT!

OH, PLEASE, NO. YOU'RE SO PROVINCIAL. CAN'T YOU SEE I'M DISARTICULATING THE EPSEMLOGICAL FOUNDATION OF GENDER THROUGH DEFFERAL AND DECONSTRUCTION OF FIXED SEXUAL SIGNIFIERS?

OH.

WAIT A MINUTE...

WHAT TH?

I FORGOT TO ACCOUNT FOR THE OBSERVER EFFECT!

YOU CAN'T PIN THINGS DOWN WITHOUT CHANGING THEM, SOMEHOW.

I'VE DISRUPTED THE SPACE-TIME CONTINUUM.

GOOD LORD, HOW MANY YOUNG WOMEN HAVE TOLD ME THESE WERE THE FIRST LESBIANS THEY'VE EVER MET? THAT MY CARTOON CHARACTERS WERE--OH, I CAN HARDLY SAY THE WORDS--

-CHOKEROLEMODELS!
Once you speak the unspeakable...

...it becomes spoken!

Boring!

Have I churned out episodes of this comic strip every two weeks for decades merely to prove that we're the same as everyone else?!

Conventional.

Here, you decide. Essentially the same?

Make yourselves comfortable. Clearly, I need to rethink this thing.

Or essentially different?

Back to the drawing board.

Rustle rustle.

Most disconcerting.