[*music plays*]

**Molly:** Welcome to Gender Reveal, the podcast where we ask intrusive personal questions and hopefully get a little bit closer to understanding what the hell gender is! I'm your host, and resident gender detective, Molly Woodstock.

[*music continues*]

**Molly:** Hey everyone! As this podcast goes live, I am hopefully about one hundred miles deep in the Washington wilderness, where push notifications can not reach me. So, feel free to tweet the last five days of news at me and I'll check my phone as soon as I'm back in a town of some kind. But that's not the point. The point is that despite being extremely logged off right now, I do not want to leave your podcast feeds empty, because we're in the middle of a season and I know you're expecting that good good gender content. So today, I am super excited to share all three parts of Sarah Esocoff's radio series, "Femme," which was produced by Spoke Studios at Sirius XM.

**Molly:** Sarah is a podcast producer and comedy writer living in Brooklyn, New York. She is currently a producer for Spoke Studios at Sirius XM, where she recently launched a new show called "Paperweight." Paperweight is a comedy podcast featuring mostly queer comedians, and it launched July 30th, so you can subscribe now, wherever you get your podcasts. As I mentioned, this episode contains all three parts of Sarah's series, Femme, which includes first-person narratives from all sorts of queer and trans folk, including your favorite gender detective, Molly Woodstock! Full disclosure: I did cut out a couple bits of my interview, mostly because you've already heard me talk about the phrase "women and femmes" about a million times. I also stitched the three episodes together a bit. But other than that, you'll hear all three episodes in full. And, it's sort of a lot of content, so if you need to pause and take a break, feel free to do that. But I *highly* encourage you to finish the episode, because the last two interviews are with really amazing trans folks, and they're so great and heartwarming and I love them so much and I really want you to hear them! So, without further ado, I'm gonna let Sarah take it away. But don't forget to tweet at me and let me know society collapses, and we'll hopefully be back next week with something about gender!

[piano based music begins]

**Unknown Voice 1:** There were literally ten boys sitting on one side of the room, and eleven girls sitting on the other side of the room, and I didn't know where to sit!

**Unknown Voice 2:** People would assume that I had I don't know, like, slept my way into that job...

**Unknown Voice 3:** Why am I so hurt by my straight female relationships? Oh! Because you were actually in love with almost every single one of those women!

**Unknown Voice 4:** It's not like I identified as a guy, ever. Like as soon as I realized I didn't have to identify as a guy, I didn't.

**Sarah Esocoff:** From Spoke Studios as Sirius XM, I'm Sarah Esocoff, and this is Femme: an exploration of queerness and feminity, in three parts. You are listening to Part 1: inside / outside. Before we begin, I wanted to tell you why I'm interested in this subject. I'm queer, and I'm a cis women, and I am what you would consider femme. I don't wear red lipstick every day, but I do have long hair and I wear dresses and I know my way around a Sephora.

**Sarah:** But something about that designation of femme, as opposed to butch, has always bothered me. Some queer people see their femininity as an expression of their queerness, but for me the two things have always felt separate. Not opposed to each other, *per se*, just not related. I wanted to hear about other experiences with this stuff, so I reached out to a bunch of queer and trans people who were kind enough to share their stories with me. Our conversations made me think about how femininity is sexualized and politicized, how it can be exclusive and even unattainable, and how for some it can feel so right. So powerful. Even divine.

**Sarah:** But figuring out how right or wrong it is *for* *you* can take time, which brings us to Part One. Part One is about that feeling you get when how you are perceived on the outside is different from how you know you are on the inside. Katie, a radio producer living in Mexico City, has experienced this a lot.

**Katie:** I came out late, like I came out when I was 25 or 26. So I was only dating guys. And I also presented more femme at the time, and I think coming into my queerness was a lot about kind of switching over and embracing some of those masculine sides of me that were always there, but I just kind of kept them under wraps. I never was very good at a lot of the stereotypical feminine things. I tried for a while, and I was never very good at a lot of the stereotypical feminine things. I tried for a while, and I was never very good at the stuff that's put on women, or women identified people. And in terms of like hair and nails and things like that, I was never good at that. And so then I think when I finally just let it all go, it was really good for me. And it completely changed the way that I interact with the world.

**Katie:** Radio, you can't see, but I'm super blonde. Like very exteremely blonde. Like the way little blonde children have blonde hair, like that's what my hair is still as an adult. And it drives me crazy- because it's so dumb, I mean, there's all this stuff still written onto blonde people. It's such a silly thing, Onto everyone, for so many different physical attributes. But this was something where I would walk into a place, and people would assume that I had, I don't know, like slept my way into that job. So when I was still identifying as straight and dressing a bit more femme, I was catering at this restaurant and event space in midtown, and I had this day where I was late for work, and so I got there- and I was- it was a dinner, so we were going through the menu, and I was getting an employee to help me figure out exactly what the menu was, because it was a special one that night, it was different from anything we'd ever served. And we were going through it, and there was this one chef who'd always been very mean to me and treated me like I was stupid, spoke to me slowly, *et cetera*. And she wasn't there at the moment but I started talking to the fellow server and being like, "OK, we've got chicken, whatever, whatever, next thing." And one of the things on the menu was mashed potatoes with *ramps*. And at the time I didn't know what those were-

[*Katie laughs*]

**Katie: -**and didn't know that they were a specific type of spring onion. I'm sorry, universe! So I was like, "what are ramps?" And just as I was asking my question, this chef who hated me, who always treated me like I was super, super dumb, stopped- and she was in a hurry too! That was the bet part. It was like- it wasn't like she was standing there waiting. She was in a hurry. She stopped her hurry walking past us to turn on her heel, look at me, and go "The best and the brightest, that's who we have working here! The best and the brightest," and she was like looking me up and down, and then smirked, and then turned around and kind of stormed off.

**Katie:** And I'd never- I'd *never* done anything to her. I'd only ever been super nice and respectful and professional with her. And for me I was like, there's literally nothing you have to go on to be mad about besides what you see. I can't- you don't know *anything* about me! And, um, after I came out and I got a side shave, and I started presenting more masculine, and making sure everyone knew that I was dating women- you know, sent out a whole Google alert thing about it, she completely changed towards me. And I think it comes from this thing that I've experienced with, mostly women, but also men- when they read you as masculine of center and they read you as possibly gay, they don't want to be read as homophobic, so they're way more chill with you. And then it also has to do, I think, with a lot of internalized misogyny. You know? We all kind of hate women, because that's how we were raised to be. Thanks, society!

**Katie:** And so all of these things that are attributed to high femininity of being blonde, and this and that, we all kind of hate. And that fades away when I start to dress more masculine, and maybe start to let some of my masculinity come out in my personality. I take advantage of that, but I know that my benefits that I now get from dressing the way I do and speaking the way I do and maybe having this energy that is authentically me but it has an edge of masculinity to it- I suddenly command more respect. It's frustrating that that's what it took to now be able to walk into a space and have people start out friendly to me, rather than walking into a space and having people start out hostile.

[*music plays*]

**Sarah:** This story reminds me of one of the most frustrating things about the word "feminine." On the surface, it's just a word we use to talk about how society pictures women. But of course, gender expression isn't just about other people's perceptions. It's also innate. To close out Part 1 of this series, we'll hear from Molly, a journalist from Portland, Oregon who's non-binary.

[*music fades out*]

**Molly:** I have a really strong memory of being a senior in high school, and I was at this event, and there were literally like ten boys sitting on one side of the room, and eleven girls sitting on the other side of the room, and I didn't know where to sit! Like I couldn't figure out which space I felt more welcome in or less welcome in, so I think that's just like a really perfect visual aid of me literally just being like "I don't know which group I belong in!"

[*Molly laughs*]

**Molly:** I started thinking about gender more as it related to me, because my best friend Z came out as agender, and was talking to me about things I had said- and Ze was like, "You know, I think that you might want to explore your gender identity a little bit more. Because some of these things that you've expressed to me make me think that you might be non-binary."And at first, I was really resistant to it. But I thought about it over weeks and months, and kept coming up with reasons to think that I might be non-binary, or reasons to think that I might just be a cis woman. And I just kept thinking about it and thinking about it and finally my friend was like, "Look, Molly, like I don' t think that cis women have to think quite so hard about the fact that they're cis women. Like, I think that they just sort of *know*."

[*music plays*]

**Molly:** It started to feel more and more like drag. Because I had all of these very feminine clothes in my closet still, and I would wear them, and it would feel like drag. And I tried to talk to a male friend about this once, and I was like, yeah this just feels like weird and not correct and not my correct gender presentation. And he said, "oh but it looks so good on you!" And I was like, yeah, but if you wore this dress maybe it would look good on you but it would feel weird – do you understand what I'm saying? And he's like "but it looks good on you!"

[*Molly laughs*]

**Molly:** And I was like, who cares? That's not the point. I'm not correctly portraying the way that I feel. Clohtes area always signaling something, and the reason that I dress as neutral as possible is because I don't want my clothes to signal anything. And I know that they always will. I know that even if I just wear black jeans and a black T-shirt and black sweatshirt every day, that's still signaling a lot.

**Molly:** But I would love to not signal anything with my clothing, if there was a way I could present in the world, and no one could like read anything off it whatsoever? I would love that! If there was I way where I could have a haircut where I felt comfortable and it wasn't presenting as feminine and it wasn't presenting as masculine and it wasn't presenting as androgynous and it was *just some hair*? I would love that. I haven't figured it out yet, but I would love it!I'm just always worried that I'm like giving off the wrong signals, and that I'm like misportraying myself somehow. And I don't want to do that. I just want to like, be a person, in the world, with a body.

[*music plays*]

**Molly:** Like a month ago I was at a Maggie Nelson lecture, in Portland, and I met this other queer person, and they were talking to me for a little bit. We did not share our pronouns, we just were talking about queer stuff, and then they turned to someone to say something and was like "oh, I was just talking to them about it!" and pointed to me. And just like having someone use they/them pronouns for me without asking my pronoun felt really really good, and I felt very seen.

[*music shifts to guitar-heavy tune*]

**Sarah:** This has been Part One of Femme. And now that we've talked about clothes and presentation, I'd like to go a little deeper. In Part Two, we'll hear from three more people about spirituality, growing up, and what happens when you're a boy wearing nail polish in a high school locker room.

[*music shifts to piano tune*]

**Sarah:** Welcome back to Femme, an exploration of queerness and femininity from Spoke studios at Sirius XM. I'm Sarah Esocoff, and this is Part Two, Past/Future. Part Two is based less on an idea, and more on a narrative, one that came up over and over again in my conversations. Almost everone I talked to remembered their childhood as a time when they felt truly free.

**Jess:** I feel like now, in my adulthood, I'm unlearning the damage that has been put on me as I got older. But I felt like I was the closest to who I was, and the strongest person, as a little girl.

**Sarah:** That's Jess, who's female friendships dating back to girlhood, were what first led her to question her sexuality.

**Jess:** When I first decided to really take responsibility for my queerness, I took a look at my female friendships, because I was wondering why I felt so- I don't know, just, *used* by these women that I was friends with. My close female friendships were basically relationships without sex, and I found myself constantly disappointed by my interaction that- I realize now that it was because I was treating them like relationships. We would have a strong, close connection, great friendship, and then they would enter in like relationships with men. And I was always constantly disappointed with the calibur of person that my friends were getting in relationships with, in terms of their capacity for emotional understanding and, like, what I felt I was doing for them. Like, how could you go for *that,* when *I* do so much for you? *As a friend*, you should use our friendship as an example as a relationship, and that's kind of like when the lightbulb went off. I was like, "oh!"

**Jess:**  I just realized I was harboring all this resentment. I was sitting with myself and I was like, "Why am I so hurt by, specifically, my straight female relationships? Why do I get so hurt?" And I was like, "Oh! Because you were actually in love with every single one of those women. And it was heartbreak."

**Sarah:** Jess isn't the only one whose friendshps helped shape her queer identity. I also spoke with Matt, who told me about a childhood friend who later became an adversary. A version of this story first appeared in the newspaper, The Stranger.

**Matt:** I was pretty nerdy in middle school. I have a distinct memory of wearing my socks "too high," and people making fun of me for that, and not knowing why that was a problem. I was the president of the computer club, and, uh- yeah, I just like, did not know how to socialize, and avoided people. But there was this kid in my homeroom, named Bill, who- literally we were seated together just because our names were alphabetically adjacent. And we just started chatting, and became sort of shy friends. And every morning before class got going, we would sit together by the computer, and we would basically make a computer game together. Like, he would tell me what he wanted from a computer game, and I would do my best as like a thirteen year old to try to code it.

**Matt:** I wasn't sure what to think of this kid, because he was also kind of strange. Like his affectation- my affectation was that I was just super nerdy. And his affectation was that he just seemed like constantly resentful. He just seemed to be constantly unhappy with everyone and everything. And I don't think that we ever would have been friends if we hadn't been sitting next to each other. But the thing that we shared was that we were both kind of loners and outsiders and just kind of didn't get along with that many other people, and just felt really uncomfortable. Like there are some kids who I think are really gregarious, and don't mind being the life of the party, and being friendly, and are not shy. And that certainly wasn't us! We were weird and awkward, together.

[*music plays*]

**Matt:** In fact, one of the- the game that we made- the game was about these two wilderness explorers who were lost in the forest. And they had, like, spotty radio contact. And I don't remember much about it other than that, but it was like dialogue that branched of them trying to reach each other in the forest. And looking back, I'm like, oh my goodness! That was just exactly our friendship, our relationship, whatever you want to call it. Like we would just- turned how we knew each other, we metaphored it into a computer game.

[*music plays*]

**Matt:** Looking back, what I think was going on was sort of a- an early experience with what I would now call "gaydar." And I don't know that he was gay, but what I was experiencing was sort of a kinship with another man who didn't know how- exactly what the rules of being a man were. I say "man," we were definitely boys at the time. But it was sort of a male relationship that had sort of a hidden signal in it, that I don't think either of us knew what to make of at the time. Like the pull of a magnet that you didn't know you had on you. We were both sort of confused by the rules of what boys were supposed to do. And I think our confusion was mutually attractive to us. For me it was because I was just sort of, like, it was my burgeoning gaydar sending its first pings. And I'll never know what it was that he was experiencing, but I've often wondered if he was experiencing something similar?

**Matt:** I was at the time, just did not get the signals. I did not know what gay was, really, I knew it was something people thought was bad. I just was not, like, ready to think about attraction to other boys, in part I think because I knew it would earn disapproval. So it was just something that I- this is maybe one of the reasons that I strenuously avoided human contact, was because I knew maybe somewhere deep inside the dark recesses of my mind, that the kind of human contact that I wanted was not the kind of human contact that other people around me would approve of.

**Matt:** We both kind of formed our own separate cliques. So for him it was sports, and I think football? And so he literally wore armor, like in the form of sports gear- like the padding and whatever bulky things you call, like, football players, whatever they wear! So, he had that armor. And then my armor was the, sort of, ironic detached artsy kids. And so we were like, *over* everything, and we rolled our eyes at everything, and it was very "Gen X" nineteen nineties Daria- you know. I looked much more traditionally what you think of, when you think of, like, the flouncy high school student. I think I had a lot of rainbow stuff at the time.

**Matt:** And so my only contact with Bill was, like, there was one occasion where he knocked books out of my hands in the hall. In all of high school, I don't think I can recall any time when we even spoke. I really looked down on him and looked down on his group, and was like, "Ugh gosh, look at this lame [*sic*] thing that they're doing! While, you know, I'm also wearing the costume of my own social group.

**Matt:** When I was most reminded of our friendship- and I don't know if I should put friendship in quotes or not- but one of the only times when I really was reminded of that, was there was this one occasion in the locker room. And somebody in the locker room asked me why my nails were painted. And so my first response was "Oh, I just like it." And then he asked, "Are you gay?" And at that point I had sort of made this deal with myself that, you know- I'd been through the whole, like, coming out to myself, and starting to come out to my close friends. I don't think I was out to my family. But I made this deal with myself of like, I'm moving forward, I'm not moving back, I'm not going to lie about it. And so he asked and I was like "Yeah, but that's not why I paint my nails." In hindsight, this was a terrible time to come out of the closet! Like, very publicly, like, in a locker room, in like 1995? Like, are you kidding me? But I did, and took a stand.

[*music begins to play*]

**Matt:** So there was this moment, this brief moment where I could see, like- 'cause Bill was alphabetically, he was in the same locker room group as me. And I could see him like look around at me. And I could see this like, *look* in him, that I remembered from when we were younger. It was sort of like this interest and hopeful, you know, approach. And, you know, a bunch of other people started walking towards me at that point. And then he joined the other people who were walking towards me menacingly. And that was the end of our eye contact.

**Matt:** I never came to school bruised or anything like that, but there was definitely like, a lot of physical contact and shoving and spitting and it was just, really frightening. Like, physically I was scared. Like getting beaten up was definitely something that felt like a very real possibility. And to this day I think of myself as very fortunate that it didn't happen, I think I was probably like inches away from it happening. So, like, there was definitely hands laid on me. But it never got to the point where I was like batttered and bruised and bloodied on the ground. I think that was the only time we really had much contact- like any kind of contact in high school. And that was kind of it. Like, that sort of femme expression earned his interest in a way that I'll never know exactly what it was doing for him. But it certainly drew his attention. It drew him towards me before the rules of masculinity, that he had become very fluent in, sort of took over and prevented him from saying anything to me.

**Matt:** A friend emailed me and was like, "did you hear about this?" And they sent me like a news article about him. And, um, uh he crashed his car and was killed in the car crash. You know, there was signs that he had been drinking, and that was it. And that happened I think in our late twenties or maybe early thirties. So we'll never be able to connect about that, you know? So much of our connection happened furtively and through eye contact. Like I remember when we were kids and our eyes would meet in the reflection of the computer screen, I remember that moment in the locker room when our met across the locker room, and I remember when I saw that article about him dying and my eyes meeting his in the image of him that accompanied the article. And, you know, I just remember like all the things that I wanted to say to him, the things I wanted to ask. And the kinship that we might have had, the sympathy we might have felt that we'll just- we'll just never have.

**Matt:** I mean, I guess my first question to him- and I don't know how, like if this is a question anyone can answer, is: "Did you like the boy that you were when you were a teenager? And how do you- what- who was that boy? And how much of him was actually you?" You know, um, it's a very therapist question I guess. But I'm just curious, like, he learned how to be that person *somewhere.* And he trained himself to be that person *for some reason*. And, I wonder why?

[*music starts*]

**Sarah:** Matt Baume is the host of the Sewers of Paris, where he interviews gay men about the entertainment that changed their lives. I love this story because it covers so much: masculinity, friendship, the way time changes us. But my favorite part is when Matt describes that feeling of sameness between him and Bill, a feeling he would later recognize as the thing that connects queer people to each other. He sees it as a kind of shared outsiderhood, a being out-of-step with the world. And I'm not saying that all queer people feel uncomfortable all the time, but I do think one of the things that makes us a community, and not just a bunch of people, is that most of us have wrestled with these questions. Questions about where we fit, and how we're seen, and who we are.

**Sarah**: Joanna, who is the last person you'll hear about in Part Two, is *definitely* asking these questions. She told me about growing up trans, and working to access bother her past and her future.

**Joanna**: I think all the things that make me feminine now, are very much things that I like carried over from my childhood. In terms of mannerisms and, like, behavior, it's pretty much the same. I was basically told that like I was weird because I was on the spectrum. So I didn't really, like, consider that the way I was acting was kind of feminine, until I got to college and met other trans people and, like, realized that. I just thought I was weird!

[*Joanna laughs*]

**Joanna:** I remember being told that, like, I sat too femininely, because I would cross my legs and stuff when I sat. And like actually being sent to therapy to do something about that. It wasn't, like, conversion therapy but it was definitely, like, people trying to like help me be more "normal" in a way that was pretty much about getting rid of femininity. No one that I grew up with was trans, so I had no one to mirror my femininity back to me and the way that I was.

**Joanna:** I didn't think about being a girl when I was a kid, just because, like, I already was! But it went unidentified for a really long time. I remember thinking throughout high school, like "Ugh! I wish I was gay! 'Cause all this would all make so much more sense!"It's not like I identified as a guy, ever. Like, as soon as I realized I didn't have to identify as a guy, I didn't. And I have like really distinct memories of being in like seventh and eighth grade and like taking the bus home. Being in the back of the bus, and there being these slightly older kids back there who were like making a scene and being kind of rowdy. And like this would happen like every week. And eventually, like, I don't know what they were picking up on, but they were just like- started coming over to me and making jokes about castration. And at the time I was just like super weirded out, and like didn't really understand what they were referring to. But it's this thing like when you're trans, of like you might not know that you're trans, but the bullies and predators around you certainly do. And that's like a real trip, to have like some of the first people like identify your queerness be people who are trying to exploit it.

**Joanna:** I was really ashamed of a lot of like ways in which I was feminine. Like I've recently like gone back and looked at my childhood, and thought long and hard about how I moved in the world, and just really realized like how much of a girl I was. Gender has been so weird in my life, because I got to read and I was basically like "Oh, look you can join this queer community, you just have to be like 'fuck men!'" So I was like, "yeah, fuck men!" Like, I'm a dyke, this is great! And like I still feel like I'm a dyke, but it's also like, I had a really faggy childhood. And I was not about to admit that I was attracted to people who weren't cis women, but if I look back at my behavior and the way that I interacted with my friends, there were undercurrents there that I wasn't really looking at at the time with like male friends and other people, a lot of whom later came out as trans.

**Joanna:** And like my project recently has been kind of reclaiming that. Even though I am a woman, I've never been called a dyke. I've been called a fag a lot. And just incorporating that into my identity in ways that are on my own terms, not as a tool for delegitimizing my gender. You know, I felt very unlovable when I was younger. I dealt with a lot of dysphoria, and I also dealt with this feeling that I think a lot of queer women have, that pursuing your attraction for other women in this like way that is so non-straight is just like predatory? We aren't taught that we have the right to feel that way about people. And I felt that way. Even though people were telling me that I should be dating women, they were telling me that I should be dating women in this way that was just so, like, *bad* to me. So like, not about love, but about like, power.

**Joanna:** For me it feels healing to be dating other trans women, just because there's so much dysphoria. Like, I don't have to prove how much of a woman I am, because we both are coming from the exact same place. We can just like be in love together. We taught at this camp for trans youth called the Spectrum Conference, which is kind of like, kids and their families come from all over the country for a weekend in Moraga, California. And it's just like, the parents go through these workshops of how to deal with the medical system, how to deal with schools, and like how to be actually good parents to trans youth.

**Joanna**: And the kids go hang out with other kids in their age group, and like do fun activities, and process a little bit. And a lot of these kids are from areas where there aren't a lot of other trans people. Like a lot of them are meeting other trans kids for the first time. It was emotional for me to be all these fourth and fifth grade youth who were just so knowledgable about trans issues. Some of them were already on hormone blockers, and were just so empowered in terms of their own bodies. And I- I did end up breaking down and crying at one point, because I just was like- Wow! If I had known that this was an option, my life might have been really different.

**Joanna:** One thing that my girlfriend told me later that sort of drew her to me, was just the was that I was with kids. Playfulness. And I like being around kids, especially trans kids, because it allows me to tap into this like playfulness that I had as a kid, this like wildness that I kind of lost when I started having to move through the world in a more constricted sort of way before I came out. It feels like being sort of adopted into a culture that isn't the one of your blood ancestors. And you know, like growing up thinking certain things of yourself but not seeing those images like reflected in the greater world, and actually like longing for this greater sense of connection which is your birthright, but no one is telling you that you have the right to access.

**Joanna:** I've been reading a lot about like getting in touch with your transcestors. Besides my sister, no one in my family is out as being queer, and no one is out as being trans. I just want to, like, you know *have* ancestry, that I can like draw on for strength in terms of like my own healing and in terms of dreaming about the futures we could have that are more liberatory. I see my like transness as an important part of my decolonial work. For me, embracing my identity is about shrugging off the role that I was supposed to play under white supremacy and imagining new roles that can work to destroy white supremacy and be in closer community with all my siblings of all backgrounds.

**Joanna**: I want to be remembered because I did good work, and because I acted with kindness to people, and because I helped people feel good about being themselves. So I've been thinking a lot about, you know, building ritual to make those connections with the past but also ways that I can live my life so that I become an elder to future generations of little trans kids that come after me. And because I can not have biological kids, that's like my legacy.

**Joanna:** For me, being an elder isn't about being charismatic or smooth-talking or anything like that. I think a lot of us deal with imposter syndrome, and it's just so important to remind young people that they belong and they have something to offer. I think that our movement is not going to be sustainable if we continue seeing leadership as this kind of heroic, exhausting task that only a few people are uniquely suited for. Like that's just not the case! We need to elevate recognition of the kind of leadership that's already happening, labor that's more feminized like childcare and cooking and all the emotional labor that people- especially people who do not identify as men- are already doing in our movements. It's so important to acknowledge that and celebrate it. It's so important to take time to celebrate our successes! I feel like especially in white-dominated organizing communities that I've been part of, we forget to celebrate sometimes. And I think that's something that we can learn from our siblings, just remembering to carve out time to celebrate being alive.

**Sarah:** From Spoke studios at Sirius XM, I'm Sarah Esocoff, and this is the third and final installment of Femme. Part Two was about looking back. Part Three is called Forward, and it's only one conversation. I wanted to put this one by itself because it's different from the others. The others are mostly remembrances of things that have happened, this one is anticipating something that's going to happen. When I was starting this project, I posted about it on Instagram, and an old friend who I hadn't spoken to for years messaged me. She told me that she is trans, but that she hasn't come out to most of the people in her life yet and she hasn't started to physically transition, which, by the way, is why I'm not saying her name. Something my friend said when we reconnected, was that she was not surprised to learn that I was queer. She had noticed a pattern: the people she was drawn to in childhood, for reasons she couldn't name at the time, often turned out to be queer or trans. I've noticed this too, and I love it. I love that in this case, my questions literally brought my friend and me back together. Here's our conversation. We spoke on the phone.

**Sarah's Friend:** I live in Burlington, Vermont. I went to UVM. I work at a local food co-op. Uh, I'm twenty-five. I'm transgender. And I haven't really started that yet, and it's kind of a sudden realization about myself.

**Sarah:** How did that realization come to you?

**Sarah's Friend:** Very slowly, and then all at once. I always knew that I was queer, for years and years and years. For a while I was like "oh, I'm bisexual" 'cause I mainly liked women. And so I always felt kind of weird, and I don't really get along with gay men that well, and all of my friends have always been lesbians. And then it was like "Oh! Because you are. *You're* a lesbian! You idiot, you giant fucking dumbass!"

[*Sarah laughs*]

**Sarah's Friend:** I kind of came out to myself fully in September. But when I was drunk, like a year ago, two years ago. And aparently I told someone once that I was trans, another trans woman who I met at a party. And then one time like a few months ago, she was like "So how are you doing with that?"and I was like "Oh, I finally realized it sober now, which was cool!" and she was like "You were really drunk at that party." So, yeah, I realized it kind of fully in September. But there was always some form of like a different- this is a difference for me and the rest of the population. And when I look back on the past few years, it's like, you've been feeling this way for the better part of a decade. And even into childhood- like I remember looking at my face as a child and thinking, my face is too wide. And I never liked looking in mirrors, and I always hated getting my hair cut. Forever. Like I always felt that way, from like age five on.

**Sarah's Friend:** But yeah, it is pretty recent. I haven't started transitioning. A lot of my friends up here know- like my roommate doesn't, because he's like the bro-iest cis dude in the entire world, so I didn't tell him. And I'm not really that close to my other roommate, she's just kind of here by chance. So I didn't tell her either. [*inaudible*] fine with it, I am just worried because it's a big deal. But my friends who know are always very supportive. My girlfriend is incredibly supportive. She says she knew before I did, which is sweet. And I'm going to be moving in with her in June, and I bet then is when I start actually exploring a bit more.

**Sarah:** Yeah, that must be a strange transitional – pun intended – period to be in, when you know you're trans, but still haven't made any steps to physically transition.

**Sarah's Friend:** Yeah, it is. I mean, the big thing is, like, I had a beard for a while- well not a beard, I can't grow that much facial hair. Fortunately for me, I'm a pretty hairless person. I meant like I started shaving just before I realized it, and then I was like "Oh that's why I've been doing that – and like always hated having a beard but always you always just did because you're lazy, I guess?"And like I've been growing out my hair. I haven't had a hair cut since May, so it's just kind of poofing out and it's all frizzy on this side of my head and is all just growing out in a horizontal angle, which is fun. So I've been wearing a lot of hats! But yeah. It's good! [*inaudible*] girlfriend, her friends all know too. And like apparently a bunch of them thought I started hormones? Which felt really good. But uh, I haven't, obviously. And I probably will this summer, after I finally come out to my mom or my dad. Ugh... Probably my mom first. She'll take it better.

**Sarah:** Have you thought about that at all?

**Sarah's Friend:** Yeah. I actually had a conversation with my mom yesterday, because we were talking about- we have like these family, friends- like they're like my aunt, uncle, and cousin, basically. But they *love* Trump.

**Sarah:** Oh no!

**Sarah's Friend:** Like, to this day, they're like "Trump is the best!" and the dad is getting into like infowars, and all this crazy fucking shit. And my mom's like, "What? You're like a sister to me and I like can't hang out with you anymore. This sucks!" And we were having a conversation about them and like gay people. And I was like "what do they think about trans people?" because frankly I'm worried what they're going to think about me. And she was like, "I don't think they even know what that is." And I was like, yeah, this is going to be bad. But my mom said this really sweet thing about trans people, where she was like "I don't know how you can look at trans people and feel-" she said "sorry" which I don't think is how you should think of it, because for me being trans so far has been almost a cosmic experience. Every step that I've taken or every person that I tell is like this is so right, this is so exactly what I was supposed to be doing this entire time. It doesn't feel like the tragedy that I think a lot of cis people think of it as. But she just said this very sweet thing, and I totally should've just come out to her then but I didn't. 'Cause it's very scary! Yeah.

**Sarah:** What was the first moment that you even considered that you might be trans?

**Sarah's Friend:** Oh God. Uh. I had like little flashes. I remember probably being in like middle school actually, and I would get up really early in the morning- I was a weird kid! But I would like get up really early, and I would go on our family computer, and I would pull up Wikipedia and I would just read things. And I remember reading about queer issues on Wikipedia of all websites, and I remember looking at the Wikipedia page for "trans woman" and being like "oh weird, you can do that!" And I knew that terms existed for people before that, but I remember reading that Wikipedia page at 5:30A.M. like very intently before everyone else woke up. And I remember there was a picture, and I remember being like "that person's trans? They totally look like a girl!" And like, they are a girl, obviously, but I didn't have that vocab as a shitty eighth grader who just wanted to play Halo 3. But yeah, it was a woman holding up her hand, and on her hand was written "XY." And I was like, "that's cool! That's really neat!" And I guess it was like a Pride march.

**Sarah's Friend:** And I just remeber that sticking with me, and I remember every conversation I ever had about trans people really sticking with me, and then not really getting why for so long. Which is now just so obvious. I even remember being very young, my sister had this costume dress. I remember wearing it, and my mother saying "Oh you'd make such an ugly girl!"And I remember being very hurt by that, but not knowing why. And I was probably, like, five.

**Sarah:** Oh man, that's so sad!

**Sarah's Friend:** Yeah, like I just remember hearing that, and being like hmm that's weird, like why does that make me uncomfortable? Now it's like, that's why.

**Sarah:** So I wanted to talk a little about- this project's about femininity and queerness. And I was wondering if you have any thoughts about that?

**Sarah's Friend:** Femininity, for me, has always been something that I haven't been able to access. I was never a particularly masculine person, but I don't think I was ever- like I think there's a generalization about trans women that they are the super gay kid in high school who like, talks with that lisp, and is in theater- and I *was* in theater, so nevermind.

[*both laugh*]

**Sarah's Friend:** But, um, I was stage crew. So, completely different. It's the butch version of theater. But anyway- yeah, femininity was always something that I couldn't really access. But I always liked it when I *could*.

**Sarah:** When could you?

**Sarah's Friend:** I guess only in private, or with very close friends. It was always something that was like, oh, okay. I can do this, here. And I was always very jealous of people that could- not jealous, that's not the right word. Envious.

**Sarah:** And when you say "I could do this here," what is "this"?

**Sarah's Friend:** I don't know. Just perform- not *perform*, because that makes it seem like it's not natural. But act, in that way. Act in a more feminine manner. I felt like if I did that, society would shun me, and I- I don't know.

**Sarah:** What are you most looking forward to about transitioning? What do you look forward to being able to do, or wear, or act?

**Sarah's Friend:** Honestly, just liking how I look. I like haven't been able to look in a mirror without being like, "ugh," for so long. Forever. And I'm very excited just to be able to like look at my body and be like, "Fuck yeah, dude. You did it!"And like have people treat me as a woman. And just live as one. Like that's just what I want. I think there's a big thing too where- I had a girlfriend in high school who asked me if I was into cross-dressing once, like, sexually. Like a fetish. And I was like, no, I think if I was gonna cross-dress I'd just want to like wear a dress out and like have a normal day. Like go shopping, go get my groceries and wear a dress and wear a big sunhat. And they were like, "oh, so that's sexual?" And I was like, "no." And now it's like, yeah- you're trans. That's why. It's not a sexual thing, it has nothing to do with a fetish or anything like that. It's just how you're supposed to be.

**Sarah:** Did you come out to your girlfriend while you were together, or did you get together with her after?

**Sarah's Friend:** While we were together. We've known each other since eighth grade, and we always had huge crushes on each other, so by the time we started dating in June last year- but we've been best friends for like five years. So when I told them, she was like "I know. You talk about being uncomfortable with your body all the time, in a very specific way. It's pretty obvious. And, like I love it about you. You're going to be so beautiful!" And she always refers to me as her wife, and things like that, and it means so much to me! She's just really great.

**Sarah:** That's like the cutest shit I've ever heard!

[*Sarah laughs*]

**Sarah's Friend:** Yeah, I'm sorry, I'm getting like a little choked up, which I don't do very often. Man, I haven't cried in so long!

[*Sarah laughs*]

**Sarah:** Well, very stereotypically feminine thing to do, so.

**Sarah's Friend:** Yeah, it's hard to do with testosterone in your body. It's harder to cry!

**Sarah:** Is that true?

**Sarah's Friend:** Yeah, it genuinely is. Like I don't cry very often, and I used to, but then when puberty hit I just didn't cry anymore. But, yeah, she's the best. She's like- when we first started talking again- 'cause we started talking again when Mad Max: Fury Road came out. And she wrote like a Facebook post being like, I still haven't seen Mad Max. And I've seen it like six times. Because I'm *very cool*, I'm a very cool person who has never played Dungeons and Dragons or watched Mad Max six times!

[*Sarah laughs*]

**Sarah's Friend:** And I was like "Let's go see it!" and she was like "Absolutely!" and we saw it. And we both were like worried that the other person saw it as a date, because we were both seeing other people at the time. But, like a week after that- she's *amazing* at make up, she does like crazy eye make up. I don't know anything about make up, so I'd tell you more about it but I don't know what it's called. She's very good. And I was like, "Oh my god, you offered to do my make up some time" and she like brought that up as "Like, two weeks into us reconnecting, you were like 'do my make up for me!' Like, I knew you weren't a boy, at the very least!"

**Sarah:** Do you know if you're going to change your name?

**Sarah's Friend:**  I don't know. I definitely will be using, once I come out, she/her pronouns. But I really *like* my name. Like I think that it's a good name, and like my mom gave it to me, I don't really know if I want to change it. I've been using it for twenty-five years. And like I know that will make some things harder for me. It'll be harder to pass as just a woman. But I don't know if I'll care? I just don't know if it matters. It's not something that causes me discomfort. Which isn't to say that *all* being trans is- I also think that's a common thing where it's like all being trans is is discomfort. And it's like, well, no, because a lot of it is- as soon as you start, it feels *so good*. It feels so right. There's like a euphoria there that I think is ignored.

**Sarah:** Do you have a picture in your mind of what you want to look like?

**Sarah's Friend:** No, because I think that's unhealthy. I think I'm probably gonna turn out pretty good, honestly. Because I think I'm an optimistic person at heart, so I think I have to think that or I'll go crazy. But I also have to be realistic. I'm not balding, but I have a typically male hairline, and like, big ol' nose, big ol' forehead. But I think I'll look good? I don't know.

**Sarah:** I think so too!

**Sarah's Friend:** I also work at a grocery store, so I'm not going to have a lot of money to throw at this.

**Sarah:** It's so expensive!

**Sarah's Friend:** It's so expensive. And I'm already diabetic. And I never graduated college. I don't want to get rid of my kids, 'cause like, the only thing I've ever wanted in my whole life is- I never know where I want my life to take me, but I've always wanted to have kids. And it's like, oh my God, now I have to- before I start hormones, I have to jerk off into a cup and get those frozen, and I have to pay every month to keep them frozen. Ugh.

**Sarah:** I feel like, being queer or trans, you have to like think far ahead in the future.

**Sarah's Friend:** Yeah, and I've got real bad A.D.D., so I'm terrible at that!

[*Sarah laughs*]

**Sarah's Friend:** Um, like, just really really bad at thinking about anything in my future.

**Sarah:** I want to hear more about what you described about how realizing you were trans and coming out to people and those steps felt cosmic and right.

**Sarah's Friend:** Yeah, they just- honestly like I'm a pretty spiritual person, like, privately. I'm such a sucker for like psychics and all that shit, where I'm like, yeah, yeah, yeah, Tarot cards- [*inaudible*] believe in that. So I think through a lens that way, and it's always like, oh yeah. This is what my soul *is*. This is how I was supposed to be. It feels like stars aligning. It feels like, yeah, this is the path that I was meant to walk.

[*music plays*]

**Sarah:** This has been Femme, a Spoke Studios production. I'm Sarah Esocoff. This project was produced by me, with help from Rebecca Seidell. Thank you to everyone who shared their stories, and check out Gender Reveal and the Sewers of Paris for more of Molly and Matt. Thank you for listening!

[*music fades out*]