

[When audience members arrive, they are directed to a table with large blank labels and a variety of markers on it. Instructions on the table read: Label Yourself: Write What You Are. Ushers who see label-less audience members should bring this to their attention and encourage them to participate.]

[Bear comes in from the back of the room, wearing a black tshirt. The shirt has a bold white square on it, in which are printed the words “affix label here.” Ze starts interacting with people about the labels they’re wearing: why they chose them, why that one and not a different one – ze draws them out about what else they could have written, and how long they have been identifying as whatever is written on their tags. People are still chatting while this happens, there’s no sense of The Show Has Begun, the conversations are very casual; ze greets whomever ze knows in the audience while it is happening as well.

This goes on for five minutes or so, until the Stage Manager bustles over and very visibly hangs label that says ‘Performer’ on Bear. We hope for a laugh. Bear acknowledges it aloud with something like, Huh, guess that’s me after all, and mounts the stage to start the show. Ze removes this label and the house lights dim.]

We didn’t celebrate Christmas. Christmas came with a fanfare I could never ignore, especially because well-meaning strangers kept reminding me of it. “Have you been naughty or nice?” they would ask. My mother would say “She’s been Jewish.” She’s a nice woman, my mother, so she usually said it kindly, trying not to make people feel stupid. They’d always say “Oh! I’m sorry,” and sometimes it sounded like “I’m sorry I made a gross cultural assumption,” but mostly it was clearly “I’m sorry you don’t get to have the magic of Christmas in your life.”

I hit grade school. Somehow, I got elected the Little Jewish Ambassador, which basically meant getting up at Christmastime to explain to my classmates why I was not suckling Advent chocolates and revising my Christmas list. “I’m Jewish. We celebrate Chanukah. This is a menorah. Have a latke!” I would say, and hand out the mini-latkes my mother made, and usually get roped into lighting my greatgrandmother’s wee little menorah while singing the blessings, solo, in front of the class.

[lights candles, and sings blessings. When ze’s finished, Bear goes to a huge pile of “Hello, My Name Is” labels and writes ‘Jew’, then sticks it on hir chest front and center, like Tarzan.]

In the spirit of cultural exchange, one year my friend Nikki’s mom invited me over to help them

trim the Christmas tree. When I arrived some cookies were consumed, and then -I was conducted into the living room - where the tree already stood waiting - and handed a box of shiny, fabulous bright red glass balls. I asked what I was supposed to do. [points to Jew label]

“Put them on the tree,” Mrs. Quesenette said.

“But how?” I asked.

“However you want.”

However I wanted? I was Jewish, and seven. I was not aware of religious celebrations which happened however I wanted, only the kind that happened exactly as my people had been doing them for five thousand years, give or take, led in this century by one of my grandfathers.

I stood in front of the tree. Finally, after watching Nikki hang a whole box seemingly at random, I reached out and hung one. It spun and shone. Cool. I reached out to hang another one...

...and dropped it.

And it SHATTERED ALL OVER THE FLOOR.

I dropped it! I /destroyed/ it. I knew that if you dropped a Torah, even if it touched the ground, that everyone who witnessed it had to fast from sunup to sundown for forty days! And I was standing over the splintered remains of this...Christmas...thing!

I ran and hid in the bathroom.

My mother tells me it took the better part of half an hour to coax me to open the door so Mrs. Quesenette could calm me down by showing me the receipt for the box of twelve red glass balls purchased at Almacs for a dollar seventy nine the afternoon before, and it didn't matter that I had broken one, fumbling around like a Jew in a Christmas Shop.

It was my first episode of breaking things, but not my last.

Ever break a chair when you sat down on it?

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I was a skinny kid. My Nana called me Skinnimarink; and my Grandma put food in front of me every half an hour and demanded I eat a little something. Of course, she still does that.

[points to Jew label, then gets another label from the pile, writes 'Fat' on it]

I was always tall, and strong, but I was always [places 'Fat' label squarely over 'Jew' label.] fat. It was twelve years between the time that puberty hit and brought a hundred pounds with it and the time we figured out the endocrine cascade of fuckupeness, boy oh **boy** were my parents sorry about all the shit they put me through for being fat.

I was born this way.

I can't /help/ it.

I'm just like you except for my pants size.

[tries to write 'good' on 'Fat' label, can't get a good angle. Motions to the Stage Manager, asking him to please come and write it. Stage Manager refuses.]

Anyone here ever been the fat kid?

Tell you what, though. I never have to come out as fat. No one assumes I'm thin until I tell them otherwise. I didn't have to agonize over how to tell my family I was fat.

[sits, takes a drink from unbranded can.]

This is a Coke [labels it]. Well. It's a Coke if I'm a boy. [shifts into expansive, boy-mode taking up of pace] I'm allowed to drink it because I'm a boy. I ordered my Coke and I got Coke, so I must be a guy.

A big guy. [toasts audience with the soda, stage manager comes over and hangs "Big Strong Guy" label round Bear's neck. Ze preens a little bit, strongman style.] Fat, but not point-and-laugh fat, unless I wear my Speedoes on the beach, maybe. So when I order a Coke in a restaurant, they bring it to me. No worries.

If a waitperson thinks I'm a girl, I get Diet Coke [relabels beverage on opposite side of can]

usually with a lemon floating in it, looking up at me like “This is as good as it’s going to get, lardass, so make the best of it.”

As a woman, I am a fat, disgusting thing, larger than should be allowed out of the house, the size of person that makes packs of little boys follow me, mooing. [Stage manager hangs “Disgustingly Fat Woman” sign around Bear’s neck. Ze deflates visibly into a small and shamed pose.]

What, you think I could make that kind of thing up? Well. I probably could. But I didn’t [takes ‘Disgustingly Fat Woman’ label off and flings it away, showing ‘Big Strong Guy’ label again.]

As a big guy, I’m tough. I walk through the streets calmly; I know I’m safe unless there’s no easier target, and a big guy is last on the list of easy targets. I take up space, right? My shoulders talk, they say “I’m using all of this right now,” they say “get your own.” They keep me safe. And other people, too. As a big guy, I walk girls back to their cars, like a gentleman.

I might not have been a boy, I may never be a man, but I have always been a gentleman.