

Marginalia

AKA: The Support Group for Fridged, Damseled, or Disposable Characters

People filed into the room gradually. Some chatted quietly with familiar faces, others looked nervous. Some filled out forms at a table near the front door. They took their seats in the wide ring of chairs. About half of the spots were still empty when a woman with a sharp black bob clapped her hands together for attention. There was a white ID card dangling from a white lanyard around her neck.

“All right everyone! Let’s get started. Mason, would you please bring in any posthumous guests?”

A thin person with white-blond hair and a matching card-and-lanyard was seated next to Lacey. They closed their eyes, and one by one, several of the empty seats around the circle began to fill with translucent figures in a variety of colors- blue, electric green, ash gray. Two ghostly women sat next to one another, holding phantom hands. Once it seemed there would be no new arrivals, Lacey began again.

“To make sure everyone is in the right room, this is the support group for the Narratively Marginalized, sometimes called the Fridged Group. Hi, to those of you that don’t know me, I’m Lacey Griggs, she/her, I’m one of the counselors here at the center. Now, I want to clarify that this is a peer support group, not group therapy. I’m here to facilitate and keep things on track, but this group is mostly about you all sharing your experiences with each other. If you’re interested in our various group therapy programs, we have informational flyers on the table near the door. That’s also where you’ll find our attendance form! If you haven’t filled it out already, I’d appreciate it if everyone could afterwards. Mason can help with spirit-writing. The center allocates funding to this group by how many people attend, and the only way they know that is paperwork. Mae, would you like to add anything?”

The blond person gave a little wave. “Hey everyone, I’m Mason, or Mae, she/they. I’m here as an assistive medium. I’m certified in channeling and spirit writing. In short, I’m here to help any spirits who can’t speak or write directly do so. It might sound weird, but I want you to think of me as a tool- like a cane, or a keyboard. If you want to talk to someone, talk to them, not to me.”

“All right, let’s go over the ground rules” said Lacey, taking the reins again. “First, we expect everyone to be respectful of one another. That means no aggression, harassment, or hate speech. But it also means not interrupting, honoring people’s time and space. Second, speak for yourself, not for everyone. No experience is universal. Third, stories stay, lessons leave. We hope this group is

helpful and inspirational for folks, but respect one another's privacy. So, if you talk about this group, instead of repeating the details of someone's life, talk about what emotional effect or insight you gained. Fourth, remember that you can't know someone's situation outside of this room. People might use different names and pronouns here than they do elsewhere. They may not want friends or family members knowing about their participation. So always check with someone first before approaching them in public. Any questions?"

There was a silence of about half a minute. No one raised their hands, and Mason sat still, hands flat in their lap. "All right. Let's check in. We'll go around the circle. Everyone introduce yourself with names and pronouns, one feeling word, and mention if there's anything in particular you'd like to discuss with the group today, so we know to allocate the time."

The person to the left of Lacey began. "Hi, I'm uh...Sarah, she/her. I'm feeling alright today and I don't have much to talk about, I just want to listen and help others today."

"Oscar, he/him. I'm feeling..." he let out a breath through pursed lips, trying to find the best word. "...mournful, today. I'm not sure I'm ready to talk about it yet, maybe next week."

Next to Oscar was one of the ghostly pair of women. She was slate blue, and her shape wavered a little. She was wearing heavy eyeshadow, nail polish, and bangles up her arms. Mason's eyes glowed in a color matching her spectral form, and they said "I'm Abigail, she/her. I'm a little nervous, it's my first time. I'm not sure if I fit in this group. That's probably worth talking about."

The ghost next to her was teal. She had shorter hair, torn dark jeans, black lipstick and several piercings. This spirit spoke out loud, apparently not needing Mason's intercession. "I'm Joan, she or it, and I'm fucking pissed off. I invited Abby so I'm mostly going to be supporting her today."

And on it went around the circle. People quietly introduced themselves. Most said they didn't have anything in particular to discuss, but a handful mentioned something on their mind. Once the check-in loop had completed, Lacey turned to Abigail. "You mentioned it was your first time. Welcome- would you like to share your thoughts?"

Eyes were on the blue-gray spirit, as her voice was coming through the medium's mouth. "Well, like Joan said she invited me. She's been here before and she said she thought it would be helpful. We're dating...we've been dating?" She gave Joan's hand a squeeze. "I mean, we were dating before we died. We actually died together. I think we might have died *because* we were dating? Like it was some sort of tragedy, or cosmic punishment or something? Which is why I wasn't sure if this group would fit. Because if I understand it right, it's more about if one person survives..." She looked around at the group, looking for responses.

“I think it makes sense. I mean, whether you feel comfortable in the group is up to you” spoke up a woman named Trixie. “But the way I see it, it’s all about the Narrative. We’re all here because the Narrative decided we weren’t as important as someone else, or some bigger message. Which is usually a pretty fucked up message anyway.”

“...I don’t believe in the Narrative like it’s a force of nature” chimed in a group member named Charlie. “But I agree with Trixie. I didn’t die. But it was after my first kiss with my ex that I had my accident. We broke up and he went on to get married and have kids. The things were completely unrelated, he was and is bi, as far as I know. But that didn’t stop his friends and family from seeing it this weird way, like me getting hit with a car was some way to teach him a lesson about the dangers of not being straight.”

“That’s what pisses me off about it,” said Joan, jumping in. “The idea that Abby and I needed to be ‘punished’ somehow for dating like everyone else. Or the idea that I ‘corrupted’ her. Her parents were full of that bullshit. Just because I was the one that introduced her to the punk scene, and queer stuff. Or because I looked more butch, or whatever. As if you weren’t going twice as hard into mosh pits and leather than I was” she said, elbowing Abigail affectionately.

“Yeah,” replied Abigail with a weak smile. “I think that’s it. It’s like everyone constructing the story forgot to ask *me* how I felt about it. I didn’t think Joan was some kind of temptress, she was sweet and bubbly and fun. I didn’t think getting my first stick-and-poke tattoo was tarnishing my body, it was me decorating it, celebrating it. When we hung out, I wasn’t falling down a slippery slope, it felt like flying. It’s like... I’m eating my favorite ice cream flavor in the world, and everyone is screaming and shouting and telling me I’m actually allergic to it. And even though I’m not having any adverse reaction to it, I get randomly struck by lightning and die anyway, and everyone blames the allergies I don’t have. ...Sorry, that was a really weird metaphor” Abigail blushed slightly. “But yeah. I think that’s all I wanted to say. Thanks everyone.”

After a pause, a woman in a pink cardigan spoke up. She had straight, shoulder-length honey-blonde hair and wouldn’t have looked out of place in a legion of suburban moms. “I guess I can go next. So, as I mentioned last week, I’ve been thinking about leaving my husband.” Her voice got increasingly choked up as she spoke. “And I feel really guilty about that. I mean, there’s nothing really *wrong*. He’s not abusive- the opposite actually, he supports me and takes care of me. But I still feel like...I don’t know...the way I put it to my therapist this week was that I feel invisible around him. And I’ve told him that, but he doesn’t get it. It confuses him. He says *‘What do you mean, Katie, didn’t I do everything for you? Didn’t I go through hell for you?’* and- I guess I should explain for anyone that hasn’t heard the story already. In short, my husband works for the government, he’s military. And two years ago I was kidnapped, and he rescued me. And he’s really proud of that- and he should be,

it was a good thing to do. He talks about it all the time. And I just don't know how to tell him...I'm not *in* that story."

Here, Katie burst into tears and needed a few seconds to wipe her eyes. "I just...every time he tells it it's all about how shocked he was at the news and how hard it was to track down where I was being held and how hard he had to fight through all the enemy troops. And it just...doesn't feel like that has anything to do with me. And he'll say it was *for* me, how worried he was for me, how angry he got about wanting to protect me. I did a kind of silly thing this morning. I read one of the old newspaper interviews with him after the incident. And in my head I replaced "wife" with "rare baseball card" to see if it still made sense. And it did. Then I cried for like an hour. And I'm glad he wasn't home at the time because he would have freaked out and asked what was wrong and I don't know if I could have told him. I just can't see how him punching some guard really hard in the face has anything to do with my fear, or my pain, or my experiences. But when I try to tell him that, he thinks I have Stockholm syndrome or something. I don't know. Maybe he's right. Maybe it's just the PTSD and I need to give it more time..."

"Stop shitting on yourself" Joan all but burst out. "Sorry, I should have said that nicer, I just think you're being kind of hard on yourself. I wasn't there, obviously, maybe there's something I'm missing. But right here and now, I think you explained it pretty fucking clearly. If he doesn't get that then I'm not sure he's actually listening."

"I thought it was weird that he jumped to Stockholm syndrome," added Sarah. "The way I understood it, you weren't asking him to sympathize with *them*, you were asking him to sympathize with *you*".

Katie's tear-streaked face looked a little stunned. "Yeah...that's a good way of putting it. But it still feels ungrateful to be upset by it. After everything he did..."

A severe-looking ghost in Georgian-era clothing with a visible stab wound in her chest let out a series of banshee-like shrieks. Mason helpfully translated this as "Gratitude is a gift, not an obligation. Loose yourself from the chains of debt".

Katie pondered the feedback she had gotten from the group. "I'll...I'll think about it. I've been working through a lot in my own therapy. Maybe I could convince him to try couples therapy? I'm not sure he'd go for it, since he feels fine and thinks it's all just me being messed up. But I can try asking him anyway. And if he says no, well...I guess I'll cross that bridge when I come to it." She composed herself, rubbing her own face.

The group gently moved on. People spoke, people listened. And for an hour on a rainy Tuesday, a group of neglected souls made space for one another's stories.