

# a (fe)male behind bars

## **January 29, production room, Seattle Magazine**

For only two weeks she had been preparing for this interview. She struggled to get it approved at the magazine she worked for. See, Chris Hodgkins was a flash from the past, there was no current interest, no timeliness in doing an article on her. In fact, she knew from people who have checked on her whereabouts that she was just living in an apartment on her own, occasionally working, usually not in politics or her usual seminars. The public forget about her anyway - no one wanted to hear what she had to say anymore. Not that she had fallen out of favor with the American public - in fact, she was loved by most women when she decided to leave the public eye. If anything, the American public had fallen out of favor with her.

But Melanie wanted to write about her, find out why she left, why she really left. The editors knew Chris didn't grant a single interview since she decided to leave her work in the women's rights move-

ment. Besides, even if she got the interview, Chris knew how to deal with the media, with audiences, and she would probably manipulate Melanie into asking only what she wanted asked.

But the writer said she was sure there was something more, she could feel it in her bones, and the editors always told her to follow that feeling, so please let her do it now. So the editors and the high-ups told her to try to get the interview, and get back to them with her progress at that task.

They expected to never hear about the matter again.

Bet she came back to them not one week later, saying one phone call was all it took. She called Chris directly, and not only did this elusive leader grant her an interview, but in Chris' own home. Editors were a bit stunned. They let her go ahead with the interview, told her to focus on the "where are they now," "why did she leave" angles, and they'll put together a long piece for a future issue. A long fluff-piece, they thought, but they had to let her go ahead with it, after having no faith in her ability to get an interview.

Maybe it was just because no one tried to get an interview with her anymore, the writer thought. Maybe the editors were right, that there's no story here, at least not anymore. But now, even after feeling this fear which began to grow into a dread, she had to go through with it. She had to research this woman, inside and out, and talk to her. See what makes her tick. What made her decide to give it all up.

And the more she looked, the more questions she had. Maybe it was the journalist inside her, to question everything put in front of you, but she couldn't get those questions out of her head.

## **writer's cassette tape diary entry, February 11**

I didn't know what I was getting into when I decided to interview her, Chris Hodgkins, **feminist leader**. I did all the research I could, but for some reason I still don't know where to start, and I have to walk into her apartment tonight.

The more I studied her, the more I was interested. She became a prominent figure in the **women's movement** when she wrote her first book, *A Woman Behind Bars*. The theory was that all women in our society were behind bars, in a sense, that they were **forced into a role** of looking beautiful, into the role of mother for children, servant for husband, employee for boss, **sexual object** for single (well, probably all) men.

The chapter that interested me the most was the one on how women adorn themselves in our society in order to please men. Women put on **make-up**, they grow **long hair** and **long nails**, both difficult to work with. They **shave their legs**, they **shave their armpits**. They **tweeze their eyebrows** - they pull hair out of their face from the follicle. Perfume behind the knees, at the ankles, at

the chest and neck, in the hair. **The list goes on.**

But that's not even the point of all of this. The thing is, a few years ago she managed to pull together the majority of twenty- and thirty-something women out there into her cause. **Everyone loved her,** in a strange sort of way. She had a **great command over audiences.** She would hold rallies in New York, then San Francisco, then Chicago, and before you knew it, **everyone was talking about her,** she was running seminars all around the country, she was appearing on morning talk shows. She was the **first real leader in the feminist movement,** a movement which for years was felt in everyone but laid dormant because **it had no Hitler.**

Did I say Hitler? **I just meant he was a good leader.** I didn't mean she was Hitler, not at all, she's not like that, she's not even calling anyone into action, she's just telling people to **educate themselves.** She's not even telling people to change, because she figures that if she can educate them, they would want to change anyway. And usually more **radical** feminists and lesbians are leery of that, they want more action - and she doesn't do that, and they still support her. A movement needs a strong leader, and she was it.

Chris is an interesting looking woman. You'd think she was a **les-bian** by her appearance - she was tall, somewhat built, but not to look

tough, just big. She had chin-length hair, which seems a little long for her, but it looks like she has just forgotten to cut it in a while, and not like she wants to look sexy with it. She almost looks like a little boy. Sharp bones in her face, and big, round eyes.

That was all I knew before I started doing research on her. I started looking into her childhood first, found out that her parents were killed in a robbery when she was fourteen, so she started high school in a small town where her aunt and uncle lived. Her aunt died a year later, and she lived with her uncle until she moved out and went to college. Her uncle died a year before she began to gain fame. In essence, there was no family of hers that I could talk to, to find out from if she played with **Barbie Dolls** with her best friend in her bedroom or played in the ravine in the back yard **with the other boys** from all over the neighborhood. To see if her **theories** were right - even on her. All of that was lost to me.

She took honors classes in high school, kept to herself socially. In fact, most of her classmates didn't know **whether or not she was a girl**, she looked so boyish. Even the other girls in her gym class didn't know sometimes, I mean, they knew she was a girl because she was in gym class with them, but she never even changed in front of them. She wouldn't take a shower and she would change in a bathroom stall.

So I started hearing things like this, little things from old classmates, but

as soon as they started telling me how they **really felt** about her, how they thought she was **strange**, they would then clam up. But it was in my head then; I started wondering what happened in her early childhood that made her so **introverted** in high school. Maybe the deaths of her parents did it to her, made her become so anti-social. Maybe the loss of her aunt, the only other maternal figure in her life, made her become so masculine. It was a theory that began to make more and more sense to me, but how was I supposed to ask her such a question? How was I supposed to ask her if her parents **molested** her before they died, and that's why she's got this **anger** inside of her that comes out seminar after seminar?

## **the interview, Friday, February 11**

The apartment building was relatively small, on the fringes of some rough neighborhoods. Not to say that she couldn't take care of herself, she had proven that she could years ago. The interviewer followed the directions explicitly to get to the apartment, and Chris' door was on the side. She knocked on the door.

Snap one, that was the chain. Click one, that was the first dead bolt. Another click, and the door was free. With a quick jerk the door was pulled open half-way by a strong, toned forearm. Chris stood there, waiting for the interviewer to make the official introduction.

"Hi, I'm Melanie, from Seattle Magazine," she blurted out, as she tried to kick the snow off her boots and held out her hand. Chris nudged her head toward the inside and told her to come in. The interviewer followed.

She followed Chris down the stairs, looking for clues to her psyche in her clothes, in her form. Grey pants. Baggy. Very baggy. Button-down shirt. White. Sleeves rolled up, make a note of that. Not very thin, but not fat - just kind of there, without much form. Doc Maartens. She had big feet. She was tall, too - maybe five feet, ten inches. But her feet looked huge. The interviewer stared at her feet as they walked down the dark hall. I'll bet no one has looked at her feet before, she thought.

Chris lived in one of the basement apartments, so they walked past the laundry room, the boiler room, and then reached a stream of tan doors. Hers was the third. Chris opened the door, the interviewer followed.

She looked around. A comfortable easy chair, rust colored, worn. Walls - covered with **bookshelves**. Books on Marx, Kafka, Rand. History Books. Science books. **No photos. No pictures.** A small t.v. in the corner on a table, the cord hanging down, unplugged. Blankets on the floor. **Keep looking**, the interviewer thought. A standing lamp by the chair. The room was yellow in the light. Where were the windows? Oh, she forgot for a moment, they're in the basement. Sink, half full.

"May I use the washroom?" she asked, and without saying a word, Chris pointed it out to her.

Check the bathroom, the interviewer thought. **No make-up. Makes sense.** Generic soap, organic shampoo. Razor. Toothbrush. Colgate bottle. Hairbrush. Rubber band, barrette. Yeah, Chris usually sometimes her hair back, at least from what the interviewer can remember from the photographs.

“Wanna beer?” Chris yells from the refrigerator to the bathroom. “No, thanks,” the interviewer says. She turns on the water.

She wants to look through the trash, see what she can find. No, that's too much, she thought, besides, what's going to be in the trash in the washroom that would surprise her so? Nothing, she was sure of it, and from then on she made a point of avoiding even looking in the direction of the trash can.

**This was getting out of hand**, she thought. There was no story here. Nothing out of the ordinary, other than the fact that Chris decided to give up her cause, and now she's living life in this tiny, dark basement apartment.

The interviewer walked out into the yellow living room. Chris was stretched out in a chair, legs apart, drinking a beer with no label.

“I really appreciate you offering me this time to talk to you.”

“No problem.”

The interviewer sat there, suddenly so confused. Chris was terse. She didn't want to talk, yet she accepted the interview and offered her home as the meeting place. They sat in silence for a moment, a long moment.



"What kind of beer are you drinking?"

"My own." Chris sat for a moment, almost waiting for the interviewer to ask what she meant. "You see, the landlord gave me some keys for a storage room on this floor, so I converted it into a sort of micro-brewery. I've come up with this one -" she held the bottle to the interviewer - "and another one, a pretty sweet dark beer. I call this one 'Ocean Lager.'"

The interviewer **felt she had to** take the bottle. "Ocean Lager, that's a nice name," and she took a small sip and passed the bottle back to Chris.

"Yeah, I used to be a photographer, back when I was in high school and college, and I loved **working in the dark**, timing things, and I loved **the stench** of the chemicals. I've given up on the photography years ago, so I thought that this would be a hobby like that. You know, it smells, it's dark, you have to add things the right way and wait the right amount of time. I like it. And it's cheaper, too," she said, and with that she took another swig. "Cheaper than photography as well as buying beer from the store."

The interviewer tried to listen to her voice. It was **raspy, feminine, almost sexy**, but it was very **low**; she didn't know if she'd ever heard a woman's voice this low before.

"Looking over your career," the interviewer finally started, "I didn't know why you just decided one day to quit. You had **everything** going right for you. People listened to you. What happened?"

She thought she had dropped a bomb.

No one ever got a straight answer for that question.

“Well, it was my time to go. I couldn’t take the spotlight anymore. I wanted to become who I really was, not what the world wanted me to be, not what the world perceived me as. I still haven’t done that. I haven’t become myself yet.”

“When were you yourself? Or were you ever?”

“I suppose I was, when I was little, but by the time I got to high school, I started **hiding** from everyone, because no one seemed to want to know who I really was. **I didn’t fit in** as who I really was. So then I started with my seminars, started trying to work my way to success, and people started to like me. But in all of that time that I was working on **women’s rights**, I wasn’t who I really am deep down inside. Not that I didn’t **believe in the cause**, but I was doing it because it seemed like the best route to success. And when I reached the top, people still wanted more out of me, more that I wasn’t ready to give. I wanted to take some of myself back.”

“Have you gotten any of yourself back since you’ve left the spotlight?”

“Some.” Chris paused. “I can sit at home by myself and act the way I want to, without having to **project a certain image for everyone else**. People have begun to leave me alone.” She paused, then looked at the interviewer. “Not that I consider you and interruption; I wouldn’t have accepted the

interview if I didn't want you here. In fact, I think I really wanted to be able to tell someone how I feel, what I've gone through. I don't talk to many people nowadays. This is like a confessional."

Melanie wondered for a moment what Chris was planning to confess.

Chris paused, swirled her beer in her bottle, then looked up. "Sometimes I think of getting a pet. I'd get a cat, but then I think of this stereotypical image of an old woman in an apartment alone with forty cats, where she keeps picking a different one up and asking, 'you love me, don't you?' I don't want to be like that. Maybe a dog. But a pet requires too much care, and I think I'd end up depending on it more than I should. I should have another human being in my life, not an animal. But I'm so afraid I'll be alone."

"Why do you think you'll be alone?"

"I carry this baggage around with me everywhere. People know me as Chris Hodgkins, and that's not who I am. I don't want anyone liking me because I'm Chris Hodgkins. That's not real. Chris isn't real, not the Chris everyone knows. The only way I could escape her is to go off to another country in a few years, maybe, and start life all over again."

"Isn't that a scary thought, though? I mean, you could ride on your fame for a while longer, make more money, be more secure. You wouldn't have to work as hard at anything. And people respect you."

"People respect a person that I'm not. Okay, maybe that person is a

part of me, but **it's not all of me**. The world doesn't know the whole story."

"What is the whole story?" the interviewer asked. By this time she put her pen and paper down and wasn't writing a word. She was **lost in the conversation**, like the many people who had heard her speak before. Suddenly she felt she was thrown into the middle of a philosophical conversation, and she was completely enthralled. "Can anyone know the whole story about another person?" she asked.

"Do you really want to know my story?" Chris asked.

"I wouldn't be asking if I didn't."

"You realize that if I tell you, it goes off the record. Besides, you won't be able to substantiate anything I say. More than that no one would believe it, especially not your editors."

At this point, she didn't even care about the interview. "Off the record. **Fine.**"

### **the confession, February 11, 10:35 p.m.**

Chris sat there for a minute, legs apart, elbows on her knees, beer hanging down between her legs. She kept swirling the liquid in the glass. She took the last two gulps, then put the bottle on the ground between her feet.

"I wanna take a bath," she said, and with that she got up and walked toward the bathroom. Halfway there she stopped, turned around, and

walked to the refrigerator. It creaked open, she pulled out another beer, let the door close while she twisted the cap off. She walked into the bathroom.

The interviewer could hear the water running in the bathtub. She didn't know what to do. Was she supposed to sit there? Leave?

Chris popped her head out of the bathroom. "I hope you don't mind, but I really need to **relax**. Besides, it's cold in here. Sorry if the cold is bothering you. We can continue the interview in the bathroom, if you want," and she threw her head back into the bathroom.

Melanie didn't know what to think. She edged her way to the bathroom door. When she looked in, she was Chris with her hair pulled back, lighting one candle. "The curtain will be closed. **Is this okay with you?**" Chris asked.

Melanie paused. "Sure," she said. **She sounded confused.**

"Okay, then just wait outside until I'm in the bathtub. I'll yell through the door when you can come in." And Chris closed the door, and the interviewer leaned against the door frame. Her note pad and pen sat in the living room.

A few minutes passed, or maybe it was a few hours. The water finally silenced. She could hear the curtain close. "You can come in now."

The interviewer opened the door. The curtain to the bathtub was closed. There was one candle lit on the counter next to the sink, and one glowing from the other side of the curtain. The mirror was fogged with steam. Chris' clothes were sitting in a pile on the floor. There was no where

to sit. The interviewer shut both seats from the toilet and sat down.

"Okay, I'm here," the interviewer said, as if she wanted Chris to recognize what an effort she went through. "Tell me your story." She almost felt as if **she deserved** to hear Chris' story at this point, that Chris had made her feel so **awkward** that she at least deserved her **curiosity satisfied**. She could hear little splashes from the tub.

"You still haven't asked me about my childhood. You're not a very good reporter, you know," Chris said, as if she wanted the interviewer to know that it didn't have to come down to this. "You could have found out a lot more about me before now."

They both sat there, **each silent**.

"It must have hurt when your **parents died**."

"**I suppose**. I didn't know how to take it."

"What was the effect of **both of your parents dying** at such an early age in your life on you?"

"I **was stunned**, I guess. What I remember most was that **my mother was strong**, but she **followed dad blindly**. And dad, he had his views - he was a political scientist - but no one took him seriously because he didn't have the background. He wasn't in the right circles. I just remember dad saying to mom, 'if only I had a different start, things would be different.' In essence, he wanted to be someone he wasn't. He failed because he was-

n't who he needed to be."

"Did it hurt you to see your father think of himself as a failure?"

"He had the choice. He knew what he wanted to do all of his life. He knew the conventional routes to achieving what he wanted - he knew what he needed to do. But he chose to take a different route, and people thought he didn't have the training he needed, that he didn't know what he was talking about. But he made that choice to take that different route. He could have become what he needed to in order to get what he wanted. But he didn't, and in the end, he never got anything."

"But you, you got what you wanted in your life, right?"

"Yes, but that was because I made the conscious choice to change into what I had to be in order to succeed. If I didn't make those changes, no one would have accepted my theories on human relations and no one would have listened to my speeches on women's rights."

"How did you have to change?"

The interviewer finally hit the nail on the head.

"I'm not ready to answer that question yet. Ask me later."

The interviewer paused, then continued.

"Okay, so your parents died and you had to move in with your aunt and uncle. How well did you know them?"

"Not at all. In fact, they didn't even know I existed. You

see, my father had no family in the States, he moved here from England, and he lost contact with all of his family. Mom's family didn't want her marrying dad, I still don't know why, so they **disowned her** when she married him. She never spoke to any of them. In fact, my mother's sister didn't even know my parents died until the state had to research my family's history to see who I should be **pushed off on to**. When my aunt and uncle took me in, it was the first time they ever saw me. It was the first time the even knew I existed."

The interviewer could hear the water moving behind the curtain, and then Chris continued.

"My parents were in New Jersey, and my aunt and uncle were in Montana. It was a complete **life change** for me."

"How did you get along with other kids from school?"

"Before my parents died, fine. Once I changed schools, **I didn't fit in**. I didn't know how to fit in. I thought it would be too fake if I tried to act like all the other girls, even the ones who were like me, who didn't fit in. **I just didn't know how to be a girl**. I wanted to, and I tried, but it was so hard.

"I just wanted to be looked at as a girl. I didn't want anyone to question it."

"Why would they?"

"I looked so boyish. **I didn't go on dates**. Because I was so anti-social."



“Do you think that has something to do with the fact that your mother died, then a year later your aunt died? They were your maternal figures, and you lost them both at a crucial age.”

“Yes. But my aunt **didn't know how to deal with me**. She never had children. She left me alone most of the time. She knew that was what I wanted. I remember once she asked me if I had gotten my period yet in my life. I didn't, but I didn't want her to think that, so I said yes, so the next day she bought me pads. I didn't know what to do with them. The day after that I told her that I would buy them myself from now on, so she didn't have to, but I thanked her anyway. That way I knew she would think that I was still buying them, even if that box in my closet was the same box that she bought me.

“Relations with her were strange. And when she died, I only had classmates and my uncle to take cues from. I wanted to be like the girls in school, so I tried not to take cues from my uncle. I tried to avoid being like my uncle. But sometimes I couldn't help it.”

“Why did you want so hard **to be a girl?** Did you want to fit in? Or do you think it had more to do with your mom?”

“No, it wasn't that at all. There wasn't a part of me that said I needed to be **feminine**. But at that age I knew what I wanted to do with my life, and that was work in political science and sociology - specifically, in **women's rights**. I knew I wanted that, and I knew that I'd have a better chance of succeeding in that field if I was -

well, if I was a girl."

"But you were a girl, no matter how much you didn't fit in."

And that was when Chris decided to drop the bomb.

"But that's exactly it, Melanie - I'm - well - I'm not **a woman.**"

"There are sometimes when I don't feel **feminine** - when I want to go out and **drink beer,** I know what you -"

"No, you're not listening to me," Chris cut in. "I'm not **a woman.** I'm a **man.** My name is Chris, not Christine.

I am a man, I have a penis, I've got **testosterone** running through my body. Just not a lot."

"You don't really expect me to -"

"Look, when my parents died, I knew what I wanted to do with my life - I knew before they died. But I also knew that I wouldn't be taken seriously in the field unless I was a **woman.** So at fourteen, when they died,

I had a clean slate. I told everyone **I was a girl.** I was given to my aunt and uncle **as a girl.** I went to my new school **as a girl.**

"And I went to gym classes and I didn't have **breasts,** and I had to hide from all the other girls. Although I was boyish-looking, I wasn't manly, so I got away with it. I shaved only occasionally, only when I had to. And once I got out of high school, acting like a girl was easier. No one questioned who I said I was. **People accepted me** as a woman.

"Then I started doing the work I did, and people loved me. I got a lot more fame for it than I ever anticipated. I was **succeeding.** It was wonderful.

"But then it hit me - I'm all alone, and I can tell no one about who I really am. I've been doing this all my life, and people would look at me like I was a freak if I went out and told them the truth now. I'm a man, and I like women, I'm not gay, and I could never tell any women that exists that has ever heard of me the truth, because then they will no longer trust me or anything I have ever said regarding women's rights. I would take the whole movement backwards if I told the world who I really was."

"That you were a man."

"You still don't believe me, do you? I'm telling you because you wanted to know, and because I needed to tell someone. But I can't destroy women's chances of being treated with respect in this country by telling everyone."

"So what you're telling me is that at age fourteen you decided to become a woman so you could do the work you wanted to do in your life."

"Yes."

"But that's a lot to do to yourself, especially at fourteen. What made you decide to do it?"

"My mother's strength, but her submission to my father, made me want to go into the field. My father's desire to do what he wanted, but his failure to achieve it because he wasn't what the world wanted, made me decide to become

a **woman**. I realized then that I could never succeed in this field if I wasn't one.

"And look at the success I've had! Look at all of the people I managed to **bring together!** I was famous, people were reading my books, people wanted my opinions. I was succeeding.

"But even with all my success, people still expected a messenger for the welfare of women all over the world to be a woman - even the other women expected this. **No one would have listened to me** for a second if I was a man."

"And so you stopped because -"

"Because there's a price you pay by becoming **what the world wants you to be**. My father knew that, and he didn't want to pay that price. He didn't, and he failed at what he wanted to do. I was willing to pay the price, I made the sacrifices, and I actually beat the odds and succeeded. But then I realized that I **lost myself** in the process. I'm a man, and look at me. People think I'm a woman. I wear fake breasts in public. I have no close relationships. I have **nothing to call my own** other than my success. Well, after a while, that wasn't enough. So this is part of my long road to **becoming myself again**.

"I'm going to have to change my identity and move to another country, I'm going to have to start all over again, I'm going to have to more com-

pletely separate myself from working on **women's rights,** but it's the only way I can do it. I'll know I did what I wanted, even if it cost a lot. The next few years will now have to be me correcting all that I changed in myself in order to succeed. Correcting all my mistakes.

"I want to have a family someday. How am I supposed to be a father? There are so many things I have to change. **I couldn't go on** telling the world I was a woman any more. But I couldn't tell them I wasn't one, so I just had to fade away, until I didn't matter anymore."

The interviewer sat there in silence.

"Do you have any other questions?" Chris asked.

The interviewer sat there, confused, not knowing if she should believe Chris or not. She could **rip the curtain open and see for herself,** she thought, but either way they would both be embarrassed.

"No."

"Then you can go," Chris said. "I want to get out of this bath."

Melanie walked out of the bathroom, closed the door. Then she started thinking of all the little things, not **changing with the other girls** in school, looking so boyish, the **low voice,** the way she sat, her **feet,** the razor, the **toilet seats.** Could she be telling the truth? Could he be telling the truth,

the interviewer thought, is Chris a she or a he? She didn't know anymore. But it seemed to make sense. Her birth certificate would be the only thing that would prove it to anyone, unless she somehow got it changed.

She could have had her birth certificate changed, the interviewer thought, and therefore there would be no real proof that Chris was lying, other than **looking at her naked**. It was such a preposterous story, yet it seemed so possible that she tended to believe it. It didn't matter anyway, because she couldn't write about it, proof or not, she offered this information off the record. She grabbed her pencil and note pad from the living room and walked to the door.

Just as she was **about to leave**, Chris walked out from the bathroom. She walked over to the front door to open it for the interviewer. Melanie walked through the doorway, without saying a word, as Chris said, "Good story, wasn't it?"

The interviewer turned around once more, but didn't get to see Chris' face before the door was shut. Once again, she was **left with her doubts**. She walked down the hall.

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