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THIS IS SORT OF ABOUT YOU:
TALKING WITH LISA VISSER ABOUT HER
CAT AND BIRD COMICS. BY STEPHEN GUY.

IN THE LATE WINTER OF 2008, Lisa Visser started handing out miniature comics to friends in Kingston. They were all the same size (a single sheet folded to form fourteen pages, each of which hosted a single panel) and they were all photocopied ink drawings of the kind of cartoonish, lightly anthropomorphized cats and birds familiar from her collages, paintings and posters. The cats and birds pleaded with each other and derided each other in the way they always have in Lisa's work, but now brief yet complete narratives were showing up. The bird was trying to sleep. The cat would have none of it. The bird was drunkenly shooting her mouth off. The cat was uncomfortable and itching to leave. The bird was lying prone with its stick legs akimbo, silent for panel after panel. The cat was trying to call but the bird wasn't answering.

"I just drew one, because I was really stressed out and I was working on some art projects that weren't inspiring me, and I was feeling kind of uncreative and tense." Lisa explained the project to me one day in December. "I had to get something out, so I just did the one. I did fifteen copies and I handed them out to people and they really liked them, the reception was really good. I handed them out at work, at open mic night, and after that I was like, well these are so easy to do and easy to make and also it feels good for me to do this, so I did one a day."

For a few months seeing Lisa meant receiving the gift

of a few more droll bits of paper. It ruled. Like a lot of her work, the comics' stark yet witty depictions of social discomfort and emotional exhaustion dared you to read them as autobiography. In a town the size of Kingston, it was tempting to read local personalities into the cats and birds. If you were vain enough, it was tempting to read yourself into them. According to Lisa, this was both an accident of interpretation and a goal.

"There were a few situations that were very specific to people, and they were actual conversations that happened, and my take on it. I was worried. I didn't want it to be like a dig at someone, like a public dig. And my audience, because everyone knows each other and everyone knows their business, I figured people could assume or figure out what was happening. But then there was also the situation where people would say "I didn't say this to you" or apologize. And people thought it was about them when it wasn't about them. There were only a few like that. I think that's the danger when you're so close to the people who read the comics, but it couldn't be any other way because I was just handing them out to the people that I saw during the day and they were often close friends."

This was the great part about the comics: Lisa got to air grievances and affection through a filter of unstable irony. Lisa wasn't the bird. Except when she was. You were supposed to find yourself in the comics. Except when you

weren't. Which was most of the time, but not all of the time.

"The funny thing is that the people who they were about seemed so oblivious, for the most part, when I was trying to be like "hey, I like you." And I feel like I made it obvious. I feel like I made these comics as a way to tell people how I felt about them, both in a bad way and a good way, and some people are vain and they think everything's about them. But these comics are about my own vanity, because it is all about me." Except when it isn't.

Or except when the comics were about Kingston. Lisa did a BFA at Queen's University and has stuck around town for a few years working and making art. Having shown in virtually every gallery in town, she started thinking it might be time to move, and the comics reflected and frequently dramatized that urge. "I think a lot of them are dealing with frustrations about my place in Kingston and I know that the first ones were things that I felt like I really had to get out. But probably a good portion of them are about my relationships with things in Kingston. Around March I was regretting not applying to grad school, not planning to leave Kingston, and realizing that I was probably going to be here for another year, and I felt like that was really daunting and I had to deal with it and accept that it was happening."

The comics are full of a familiar kind of uncertainty, and they are an amusing and accessible take on some familiar pain. If you've ever felt annoyed by the cat or

the bird or the Kingston in your life, there's something here you'll recognize. You can buy copies of the comics at Made 4 You in downtown Kingston or from the artist herself. Contact information and most of the comics are online at <http://catandbird.blogspot.com>. You can also visit www.lisavisser.org.

