

I. COMA TOAST

(IN THE FUTURE, when things are slightly better because there has been a big change.)

Back in the present, my lover Nadine and I have moved to a new part of town to reaffirm our vows. The old streets were too familiar, telegraphing past failures and complaints. Each landmark, a bitter nostalgia.

We'd come to that time in our romance where we knew too much, and so the real loving could begin. Deception ends then, the deception that one is more important than the other.

Now for the new regime:

1. communication
2. negotiation
3. reconciliation
4. healing

This is the sequence of a strife worth living.

To forgive pain is to create a friend for life. To be silly in such a moment, viciously wrong, is to create an enemy. If you are cruel and stupid when you should listen and be kind, don't blame her.

Look at me, Reader.

I don't believe in closure, I believe in the reopening of love.

People can get court orders to keep communication from happening, why can't we get court orders to sit down and talk it through? That would be my idea of a better world.

Amazingly, and wonderfully, I do live in a better world. You see, the society that surrounds my feelings has finally taken a huge step forward, one that can inspire me to do the same. For now, some days hence, Our Town's most recent election has yielded the most surprising victory. At last, voting has created progress and just as I have become emotionally up to the task of betterment, my government leads the way with:

THE SELECTION OF OUR NEW MAYOR AND HER MARVELOUS WORLD VIEW

Yes, the citizens have chosen visionary change at last! Who knew that New Yorkers would some day wise up? But now that they have, I can too. Finally, all hopeful gestures can reach their desired goals. It's The New Era, and just because we all decided to try something true.

I'm excited about this. And proud of you.

Evidence reveals that facing and dealing with problems requires more than one person with a spine. If only one person has a spine, it will be broken by the other's lack. But two spines, two capacities for recognition, and two evolving individuals with their own specific knowledge—this is the formula for shifting to the freshest spot.

New Yorkers have collectively agreed to change for the better, and so have “we.” Nadine and me.

My society inspires us, and I am happy.

Tomorrow morning we exist, coexist, form habits, and exercise comforts in Terrainville, a new Manhattan neighborhood next to Flower Market.

The elevator in this building is made exclusively of ice. So, to rise to each occasion, the tenants must drink great quantities of gin until we think that we're better off than we are. That's how we get in and out of the apartment.

Delusion, sedation, unwarranted jubilation, warranted.

Gourmet soup and little chocolates decorate our refrigerator door, photographs of home-made meals. We, so busy, only have time to make coffee, trying to chit-chat in the mornings between long periods of sludge. That moment, to say what I did and hear what she will, that brief loving presence after a night of shared sleep, that is the true time. All the rest of the day I fear and regret, so I can share a coffee with the girl I adore. I never even make toast. The joy of being with her lets hunger play a vague second fiddle.

But, just as the greatest pleasure complements fear, I also refuse to own a toaster. I fear that the bread crumbs will attract mice, thereby rendering our home sordid and a disgrace. An excuse for rupture. I'd rather forgo shame than have toast. The specter of crumbs on the floor, or burning bits of bread. Those flames would leap, and make all my dreams disappear. There are, after all, live gas jets buried historically behind the light fixtures of these old, landmarked hovels. That's what makes this apartment so desirable, that it has a dangerous past. Substandard living conditions are hard to find these days. They're edgy and give the tenant special status, as I must daily avoid combustion to keep my love drinking coffee before me. Take no chance. One little fire and that would be the end of me and all my labors. All my little bits of beauty. For this reason, I occasionally buy toast on the street, even though I always overpay. And then fear all day.

Ours is a busy neighborhood. There are many outlets for toast. Some are dank and some are dreary. Some are exclusive. Some whistle for me.

One morning, before work, when none was said nor done, we slid in with the sun and then slurped down the stairs for togetherness and toast. The rain on the plate glass window, umbrellas, and one unrecognized smiling devil in a see-saw of gray passed by. We looked at that figure, crossed our legs, and flapped our shoes. Ah, togetherness.

Turning slyly, I gazed at Nadine's humanity over the rock-hard table. In Los Angeles, people earn money and cover their kitchen counters with pink granite. But in New York City, no one has kitchen counters, we slice on ingenious contraptions that fit our little space. So, the only rocks in our apartments used to be in our hands. Reminders of the protests of our youth. Their outcomes can be most easily spotted in contemporary commerce. Hence, with some satisfaction, I glanced outside at the Unisex Sari Shoppe Imported From Chicago, and then turned back quickly, just in time to notice two new truths about my light, Nadine.

1. Over these years, she has changed so much for the better.

Blessedly, I have loved her long enough to notice. It would have been stupid to hang up the phone and never see each other again.

2. She now has grey hair.

Neither of these "facts" had ever been that way before. And so I had consequently to ask myself the following question:

Do I have grey hair too?

In the past, I would have feared this kind of associative inquiry because it would have been a reflection of the narcissism at the base of my homosexuality. The other should not associate to the self. Or so they say. All my life I've worried about being selfish, about listening, about considering the other, and so I've been repeatedly crushed. Then I realized one sunny day that true narcissists never

ask themselves these questions. They destroy arbitrarily and never pay the price. Now that I am free of the fear that I might be narcissistic, I am plagued by the fear that you (Reader) truly are.

Natural disasters and historical traumas provide the opportunity to bring people together. But there is nothing as divisive as human cruelty.

Definition: The consequences of your actions on others do not matter = Cruelty

That's how I know I have truly lived. I fear the unaccountable ones. I already know the damages that they do. The only mystery remaining is, are their ranks about to be swelled by (Reader) you?

Only the fear of being a selfish homosexual has been quelled. This relief, to now be able to associate with others without feeling pathological about it opens up all portals. For I was then able, at that Brekfsto-Resto, to ask the real question, the one at the heart of the manor.

Are all women going grey?

Or is it just me? I mean her?

You can spot the ones who dye it. Every strand is the same hue, or so deliberately varied that the viewer is distracted from the necessity of aging. The bad dye job looks stinky. What's the point? We all know what's under there. I prefer Nadine's natural variety, the streaky kind. I like a body that reflects someone's life. But that's the thing with us gray-haired ladies (if I am one), some of us have very girlish bodies. Robust and hungry. We are animals. Our hair is irrelevant except for aesthetics (huge). Hair color means nothing

about our potency, everything about our history. We've risen and splattered, risen and splat. We know what it takes to land flat on our backs. We should be honored. Walk among us, serve us tea, and look deeply into our eyes. I like our guise, the truth, the sad vulnerability of knowing. Of not hoping any longer for what can never be. Of loving the things we do privately.

This toast with Nadine was a casually loving date between two old cronies, two members of the same secret society who had formed one of our own. We'd signed the card in the ancient days when you could phone up any other gay girl in the United States of America and she'd call you right back. Sadly, now that we're freer, no one returns phone calls unless there is something in it for them. But my gal and I reminisce fondly about the former tribal bond and are much the better for it, even though you can't stop the future. And why would anyone want to try? That's the thing about my group. Lesbians have a great shelf life. We don't need plastic surgery. The rest of the world runs around trying to grab hold of some younger person's tale, while we get more beautiful every year. Our knowledge becomes rarer and more alluring.

This morning I would be disorganized, late, wrong clothes, unbrushed. Nadine glided from the ice room with a fashionable scarf around that prominent neck and a soft impeccably clean sweater. It showed off more of her body than there actually was. *Oh my*, I thought, feeling like a devil. Brand new shoes on her, dainty black boots. The leather not yet creased, its life before it. Buckles hinting tastefully at bondage.

I took a new look at my old love. If her eyes had been bluer, they

wouldn't have faded away. Maybe I could have seen through them into her heart. Her mouth? Can't remember. Instead I was riveted by the attention she paid to her knife. I was jealous of the butter. Then, connecting again, a few dirty thoughts were allowed to pass across the toasty table. Knowing that hesitancy is mature, I thereby felt insecure. Aroused, aware, and recommitting. We have to preserve what is lost in order to know that we have lived. But if it is lost, it cannot be preserved. So "loss" is the wrong word. The thing remembered is being seized by absence, and so I must, must, must grab it back ... Oh yeah, I looked down right then and saw a long, black silk blouse, oodles of tactiles. Real tweeds. Heels.

Do you grasp the moment? Two knowing lovers with a chance for more in a better world. What a place to start a futuristic story. Looking to the future means there will be one, which is a sign of great hope. And so, optimistically, we go forth.

Dark skies mellowed, shook, and died. Now, pools of dried butter in crispy whole wheat, we departed into the former rain and she went along with kisses on the sidewalk. Although no longer illegal, still crusted with the frisson of potential humiliation by others. Two well-dressed women in love in the splurge of middle age.

The lighting was so demure, naturally gray and smoky. We have had better lives, after all, than we would have being straight, but only together. Alone is the fall. Into their mercy. And they don't have any. The others. Nadine, it's our mercy or none.

I have a collection of memories, too numerous to list, or even to hold conceptually, too onerous to miss, mutinous too.

Brandy in snifters, like actors drink in the magazines Nadine works for. Actors. They're everywhere. Especially on the advertising

pages my dear one produces with electronic/digital/solar/oceanic systems that seventeen individuals used to be paid to do. Only some of those folks have found new jobs. Others are now too rich to work, and the rest? I forget.

Our shared knowledge has brought me through every scary moment.

We've each pleased more women than any United Nations agency. After all, only the crazy can resist shutting their eyes and getting fucked, despite the lost loves gone poison, intentionally. I don't believe in breakups. If you look and listen, every loving moment can be praised.

Hey you? Still here? Yoo-hoo.

Give me your body with full confidence. I'll know what to do. Then, very proper, a nice kiss goodbye. Once again we did each other a favor.

The street is always gorgeous afternoons after making love. I've known that feeling since I was seventeen years old. You can't remember it, just recapture it.

When Nadine comes home tonight, I'll be lying between the sheets waiting for her to melt the ice in the lock.

Manhattan wasn't always this way.

2. SPOON

I HAVE ALWAYS believed in precision. That it is, in fact, the centerpiece of truth. The continually vague are continually lying. Try to pin them down and they'll slash out like wolves.

Like most of this era's cerebral women, I work as a copywriter. Boiling it all down to a few words. This job is about reducing experience to bite-sized morsels, which is generally dehumanizing and yet requires humanity. You have to notice the truth in order to be able to avoid it. In the olden times I would have been a great corporate secretary, bringing a woman's touch to a big bad machine. Now they don't have secretaries anymore, just vice-presidents. These are the saddest men I have ever seen.

I've been at this job for the rest of my life. At some point long after my adolescence, every company that could survive merged into one ... with distinct divisions ... so downsizing ... while never-ending ... no longer seemed to be happening. It was economic mitosis, an undetectable action of the natural world requiring a microscope to observe. We were blinded by the fun of all having the same boss, THE MEDIA HUB, while our units provided Identity. Everyone knows what their friends are going through when there is only one field. Empathy becomes easier to muster.

When I finished my Postdoctoral Studies in Placemats of the Moyer Age, I took my place at THE MEDIA HUB. It was waiting for me. On my first day of work in this branch, so long ago, I went to the corner and took a sauna. In those times, before things were slightly better, even waitresses needed to be able to translate from the French in order to get a job. Everything was so competitive

then, even being exploited was hard to get. All women had to be overqualified to earn a basic check.

In that particular sauna were two old ladies, Eastern European accents, recent émigrés. This was decades ago now, before Bulgarians became the world's street people. The new white underclass. Currently, Albanian junkies hook on every corner of the western world. And Japan. But this was before their fall from Pseudo-Socialism.

I looked at my ancient naked colleagues and saw that one, talking about her grandson's bar mitzvah, had a number on her arm. Just like my old granny's cousin, who I met for two hours in an airport café. The tattoo on my cousin, Dora, began with the same letter as the tattoo on the flabby arm of this naked woman in the tub. The letter A. For Auschwitz. Dora had been a slave laborer there, working in a munitions factory. After the war, she was dumped from the Displaced Persons' camp to Israel, where the authorities considered it work experience and gave her a job in a munitions factory.

"My cousin was in the same camp," I said conversationally, reclining against the jacuzzi's caress. "Auschwitz."

"I was in Auschwitz," she said. "But how did you know?"

"The letter A," I said.

"That doesn't mean Auschwitz. It means *Arbeiter*. Worker. I was a slave."

"My cousin too," I congenially assured.

"Then she should get her money. They're paying now, for the work. I got a check from Volkswagen."

Her name was Frieda Berger. She had come from Romania ten years before. She was nice, friendly. Sad that my cousin had recently died. And later I thought—*this is the importance of precise detail.*

You see, I could have gone through my entire life from my soft seat of comfort believing that A=Auschwitz, that prisoners were identified by their locale. And all my life I would have been wrong, and somewhat deluded, thinking that geography mattered, when actually these people were identified by function. Not knowing this information would have made me miss the whole thing. How dehumanization actually works. And in my armchair of generalized thinking, this other person's life would have remained so fuzzy that its reality would have been unknowable to me, while I thought I knew it all. I wanted to change history in order to make me feel safer, and the lack of precision would have let me do it.

I report this to you with hindsight.

Now, as my own city is changing within me, every moment filled with telling detail, I know that I have to really pay attention. Now I live in the midst of a huge social transformation, and those can always go either way. Sometimes, come the Revolution, we all eat strawberries and cream. Sometimes, come the Revolution, we only eat strawberries and cream. What if you don't like strawberries and cream? Sometimes, come the Revolution, we *have* to eat strawberries and cream.

Nadine and I watched our new beloved Mayor, Sophinisba Breckinridge, rise to power. And then we watched the changes that followed. Until, one day, the changes actually affected us. This was that day.

This very revolutionary strawberry and cream morning, I received a notice beckoning me to a meeting with one of America's most powerful cultural arbiters: Harrison Bond.

“Mister Harrison Bond requests a personal audience with

you, as a consequence of the great social change that is currently underway.”

I had been chosen, suddenly, somehow, to have the opportunity to meet with him and taste the schlag. Wow.

That’s the new system, I thought with the grandiosity of recognition. *The new system is working for me.*

I, a lowly copywriter with great secret dreams, had been selected by the New Order for individual attention. This was true Democracy, finally. Anyone can get inside the system now. It’s all random, as it should be.

You see, it had finally been acknowledged that there was no relationship between merit and reward. That while on occasion people doing truly meaningful acts were given presents, it wasn’t because they deserved them. It was a coincidence. They got the presents because their fathers went to some college, or they had sex with an ugly casting director, or they made the person in power feel good about their own mediocrity—some coincidence like that. At the same time, it seems that the vast majority of truly valuable gestures—the kinds that expand understanding and create hope—were excluded from recognition. So, since those with experience, praise, and stature were found to have no merit, and the truly deserving were so alienated they couldn’t invest in any system, the only fair solution was to just open the floodgates and let everyone in. Hopefully, it would all sort itself out.

Once the standards had changed, the doorways to opportunity were suddenly filled with feet. My big dawgs included. It was a grand chance, but I had to keep track of all the details in case I blew it. Then, at least, I would have a true story. To tell Nadine. And

we could muse, dissect, and laugh. Regardless of the outcome, right? That's love, isn't it?—having someone willing to share the disappointment.

At The Opium Restaurant on Avenue F, the moon recalled those of June and other months with transitional weather. It passed, hovered, came too close, and then recoiled. The citizens found this confusing: the seduction followed by withholding. But then, they each remembered the last woman they loved, and the moon's ride suddenly felt familiar.

Movement, unpredictability, seasonal containment, and public transformation without public transportation. A lunar borderline personality disorder. The shifting sky assured the existence of fate, divine order, external consequences while waiting endlessly for the broken-down bus.

At the corner bus stop with no bus in sight, the doomed waiters glanced into The Opium out of boredom and hunger. But they had to be in another world, awaiting their ride. Later, perhaps, one of them could grab a stand-up hummus at Mamoun's Falafel. But those not on the go, the most jejune of our clan, sit here and demurely lunch as I wait for the tall, quasi-presentable man.

A spreading cloud darkens the restaurant's front yard and then dazzles it. When the shade finally passes, only the shadow of my now-arrived companion looms brightly over the table. Mister Bond. Young man, not so young, whose fate has been sealed by his own physicality. This meal, a symbolic truce between two worlds, The Mediocre and The Small, was mandated by the sudden, shocking social advances of only one year before. It all stemmed from Sophinisba's new decree, the *Dissolving the Pretension That Has Come to Define Literature Act*. It was the nine-hundredth

campaign promise that she'd actually kept.

My co-eater, Harrison Bond, had been an important figure in the dominant paradigm due to his persistently relative youth and persuasive lack of life experience. He practiced a kind of literature called "Modern Situations." Each story involved a couple, a prosperous but banal location, and breezy journalistic sentences. The couple would have glib, ironic experiences. It was a conceit that diminished life, his power. But, in this pause between hope and ancient distrust, I poured us the wine. *Chateau du Lait*. It's the post-raw years now, when this pour took place. Wine comes from Nebraska. Those abandoned crystal meth labs turned out to be good for something. Smoked mozzarella is made in Detroit in former automotive plants. Ford mozzarella or Chevrolet. The poor are still poor while the working class smokes mozzarella for their daily bread.

As I watched Mister Bond silently chew, I began to reflect on the miracle of our changing collective life. Now, by the luck of the mighty pendulum, one less person goes hungry under our cherished new system because I hand over my lunch to a passing collection truck every other Thursday. We took a vote in Manhattan, each man, woman, and child. Would we rather that people go hungry OR would we each give up lunch once every fifteen days? We voted to share. And for that same reason, so that I can get my reasonable due, this tall fellow has to endure a lower stature than he always expected to enjoy. This new system was devised by a German Jew (Sophinisba's mother's maiden name was Rosenbaum).

Life is only a shiver. The light through neighboring Coke bottles is a lonely sign of impure sensibility. Everything else on our plates is natural and home-grown. We can sit out in front and eat peacefully now that the homeless are no longer banging through

our garbage cans. They're busy eating my lunch.

We waste in peace.

Ah, social tranquility. Thanks to Sophinisba and her Retrocrat Party, things are a little more hopeful than they once were. So no dirty claws lift old rice from garbage cans to their own cracked lips. No rotten scraps interrupt our lovely meal. No resentment from faces other than our own. No one else's hunger.