

## Heterophobia

*Homophobes have not spread their fear to everyone,  
just to us heterophobics*

B Y L E E L Y N C H

I am at a workshop attended by seventeen presumably straight men, eleven straight women, and two lesbians: Lover and myself. As I am familiar with most of these people, I look around the circle in a relaxed way, listening and idly watching the straights fidget, doodle, yawn.

The impulse takes me to toy with Lover's long hair. I reach my arm around her to do this. A thought nags — is this appropriate behavior right here, right now? I trust Lover to stop me if she is not comfortable, but she seems content with the touches. My actions seem to interfere with, distract no one.

Yet the nagging thought makes me self-conscious. I tell myself no one will condemn me — it's not sexual but affectional. Cut it out, I chastise myself, you're being a real throwback closet case, we're out to everyone. It's what we give here, not who we are that matters.

## THE AMAZON TRAIL

At that moment, Hawk-eyes catches my gaze. The largest man in the room, with brows as sharply arched as First Officer Spock's, with a set of stinging dark eyes and arms folded across his chest, he's looking me straight (so to speak) in the eyes. Is he censuring me or off in outer space somewhere dreaming about some heroic deed or lovely lady? I resume looking around the group, but every time my eyes come back to his, he's glaring at me.

Oh, bother, now what? I'm not about to stop petting Lover's hair just because Hawk-eyes is homophobic. Is he playing some sort of intimidation game?

I remove my hand from Lover and take up my usual weapon, a pencil. Life is like math, often I can figure out problems on paper that I can't figure out in my head. On the other hand, I am your classic sufferer of math anxiety.

The man's homophobia is his sickness, there's nothing I can do about it. Then what can I do? Ah-ha! I can work on my *heterophobia*.

Yes, I admit it — I am heterophobic. Hawk-eyes' folded arms threaten me, his hounding eyes change my behavior. My immediate assumption is that he is writing letters to the editor in his head about requiring the death penalty for queers. And enjoying himself thoroughly.

It's not an easy habit to break, 29 years of acknowledging masses of Hawk-eyes. Not just noticing them, but watching for them, playing to them, as if I can't be a whole gay person without a hostile audience.

At fifteen Suzy and I would go to Greenwich Village and taunt tour buses. The sightseeing companies of New York City included the Village on their itineraries. I saw my share of Hawk-eyes staring through those many-windowed caravans.

When we saw a tour bus we'd make out like two — a popular word back then —

nymphs. At the last possible moment, as the bus loomed over us, we'd break away, smile and wave. We wanted the tourists to know that we were both young women. We wanted them to see that we looked just like their daughters. It was simply an expression of who we were, queers in a straight world. The act completed our identity.

Heterophobia is as much part of my makeup as lesbianism. Somehow, by defying the tourists I created the courage I needed to walk the streets hand in hand with Suzy. I loved her with all my fiery adolescent heart, but I also loved being gay. And being gay was intrinsically political, long before the marches, the rhetoric, the shouting and dancing in the streets.

It takes two to make a phobia: the feared and the fearful. Hawk-eyes may have been conditioned to cast hate and disapproval my way, but I have been conditioned to react. I know that Lover, who came out post-Stonewall, presumes acceptance, expects it. So drawing on my history, my foolhardiness, or courage, I put down my pencil. I reach behind Lover once more. I toy, deliberately, defiantly, with her hair.

It is two days later. I still have no idea if I made up Hawk-eyes' hatred or if it was real. Meanwhile, the National Organization for Women has announced that it has targeted Oregon for attention because of a restrictive abortion initiative. Molly Yard, President of N.O.W. will speak here this week.

The anti-choice people have taken out a full page ad in the local newspaper, blown it up and are pushing it in people's faces outside the post office. It is full of quotes taken out of context, and leads with large letters across the top of the page:

*The simple fact is that every woman must be willing to be identified as a lesbian to be fully feminist.*

Do you think they are gay-baiting? Pulling out the old lavender herring? The ad asserts, "...N.O.W. amounts to a lesbian rights organization that has been ingeniously marketed by its backroom strategists under the appealing banner of 'Women's Rights.' The ad is paid for by 'A Few Good Men.'"

I sit by the phone, contemplating all this, loathe to make a call. It has nothing to do with lesbians, or abortion or Hawk-eyes. And, of course, it has everything to do with all of it. I need a catsitter so Lover and I can travel together now and then. A non-gay friend gave me a name. She does not know how the woman feels about gays. I tell this to Lover who recommends that I ask the potential cat sitter how she feels.

Ask her? Say *we're gay is that a problem for you?* (then breathe). Okay, I tell Lover, knowing this is the best way. How could I ever think I could hide it anyway with a house full of lesbian and gay literature, photos of us at the prom . . .

I make the call. Oddly, my heart does not beat as it once might have. Forty four years of this stuff. "I want you to know that we're gay," I say to the woman. "I'd rather know now if it's a problem for you."

"No, no, no," says this non-gay stranger. "My grandson is gay. I've worked with lesbians on the assembly line. That's your lifestyle. I don't care."

When we meet later I learn that her grandson has HIV disease and expects to come home when it is time to let go of life. His mother is a friend of the Neighbor Boys and has been wanting to meet me for years.

A Few Good Men have not spread their fear to everyone. Except perhaps to us heterophobics. ▼



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