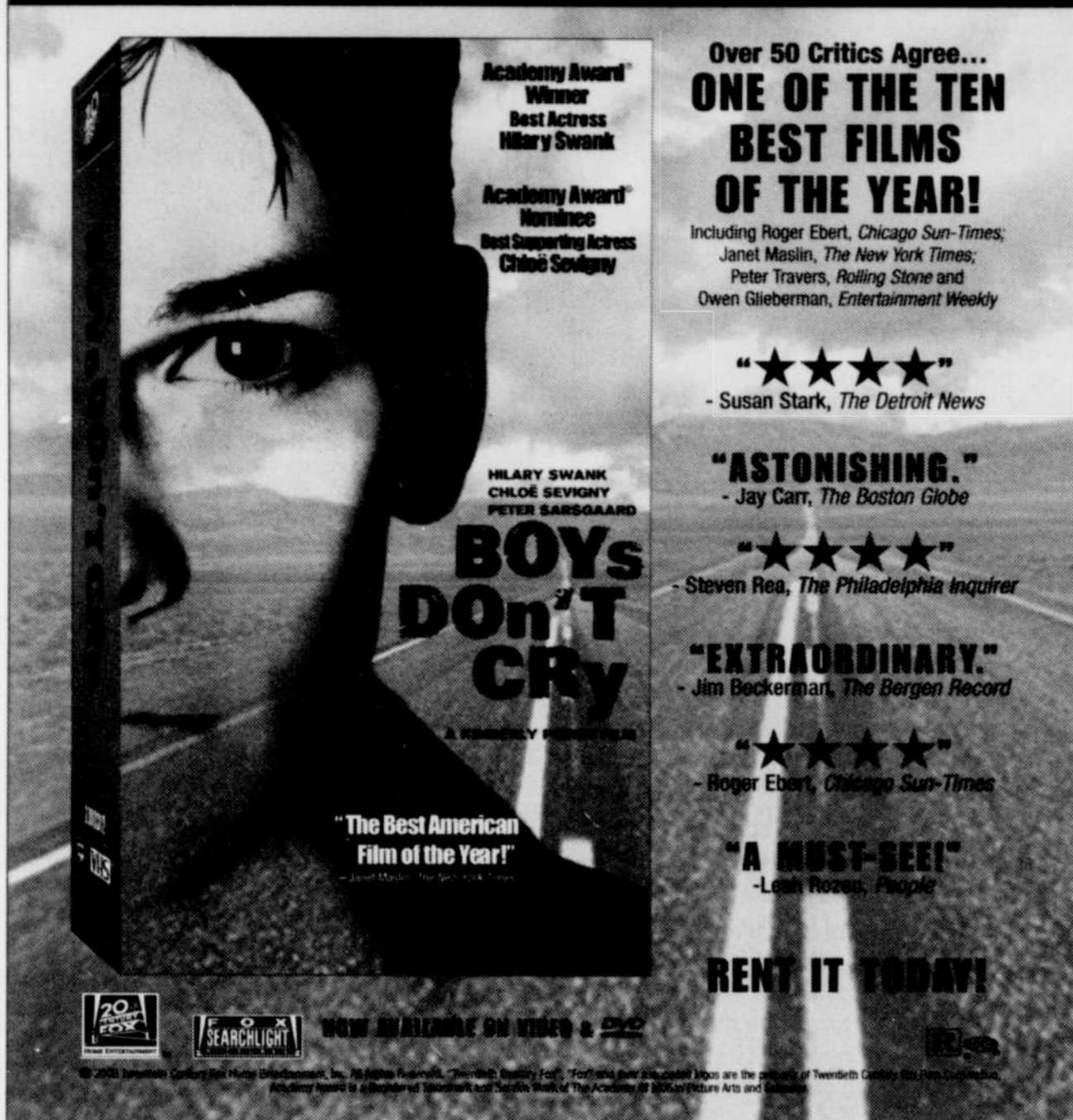


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Letter to a friend

A Portland man's belated response to racism

Dear Will,
Thanks for spending time with me last weekend. I hope your stay was both comfortable and enjoyable. Certainly, Portland is not the universe that New York is, but you have often likened Portland to a "beautiful jewel," and I could not agree with you more. It is a lovely city, and I am glad and honored that you love it too.

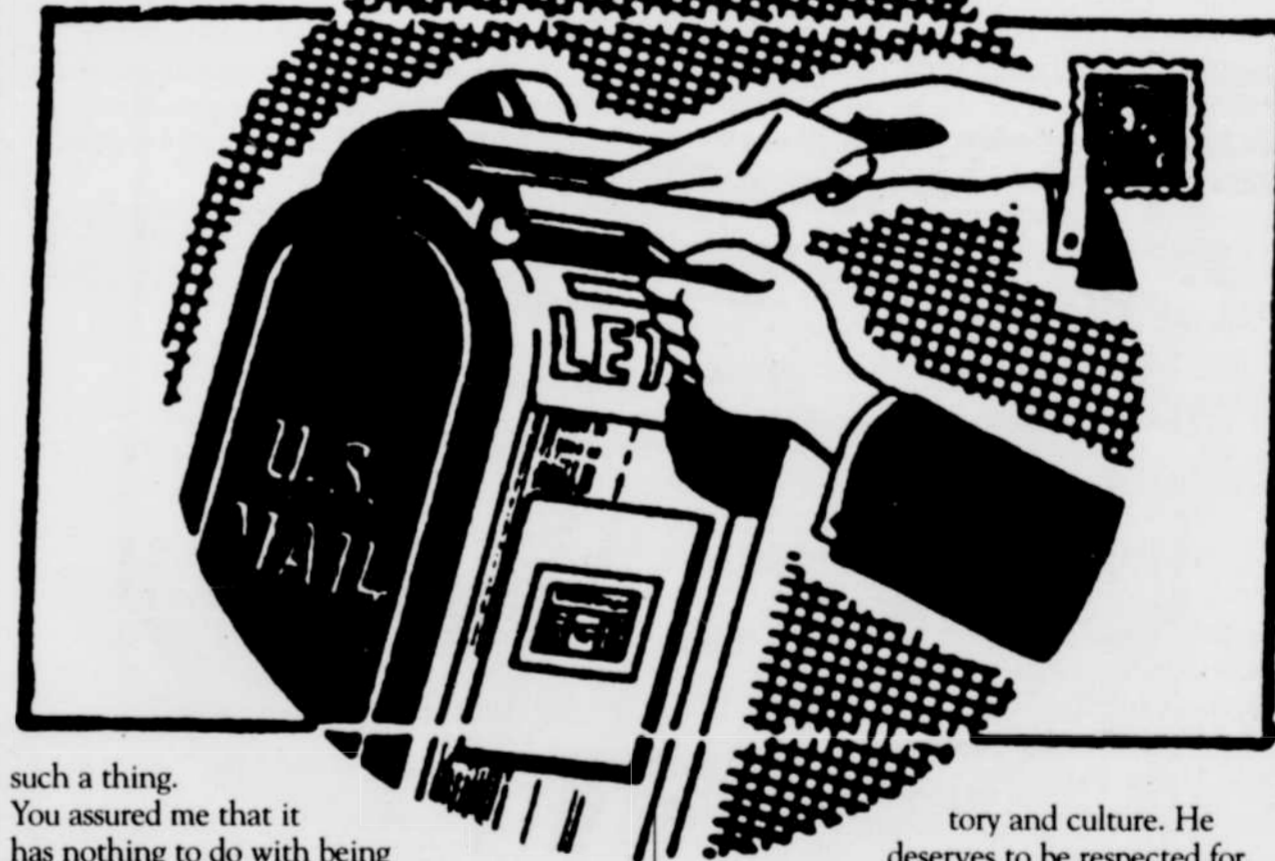
While we were at Scandals on Saturday night, I was happy to hear that you and Russell are forming a closer relationship. He seems like a fine young man and, from what you tell me, he is really devoted to you. How sweet! I am sure that both of you are reveling in the heady early stages of young love. Relish all of that while getting better acquainted.

During our chat that evening, you commented that you had told your mother Russell is part Italian. We both are aware that he is part Mexican and does not have an iota of Italian in him. To be honest, I found that very surprising and was confused as to why you would do

more. All this was achieved by simply stating that he is Italian when he actually is Mexican. His ethnic identity was erased as inferior and undesirable with just a few glib words. What facilitated this gross misrepresentation? Was it the blue eyes or the fair skin? Has the rationalization made the lie any easier to deal with? I wonder how Russell would feel if your mother seeks to explore his "Italian" roots with him?

When I suggested that you tell your mother the truth, you hastened to admonish me with "you don't understand my mother." However, I wonder if this really has more to do with your prejudices rather than your mother's? You have had a time-honored antipathy toward your mother and have proclaimed your near hatred of her. I would imagine that this would be the perfect opportunity to let her know the truth and not pander to her ethnic biases. However, you have elected not to do so, and I doubt that it is mother's reprisal you fear. My sense is that you have indulged in this untruth to make the situation more palatable for yourself. Perhaps you have discovered that Russell is easier to date if you "make him" Italian.

Stating that Russell is Italian does not make him so. You are well aware of that immutable fact. He is part Mexican and has every right to feel pride about his his-



such a thing. You assured me that it has nothing to do with being racist, while averring that it is your mother who is "extremely prejudiced" and who "just would not understand." After I had choked down a few sips of Sprite, I asked you why you chose to misrepresent the ethnic heritage of your partner. "Well," you answered, "mother just assumes that most Mexicans are only good for house-help." Were you really shocked when I was rendered speechless and worked to pull my jaw off the ground? I was appalled at the disrespect you have shown him, Will.

During the course of the next morning, when we were wandering through the shops at the new Pioneer Place, you said: "Well, Russell can easily pass for Italian. He has blue eyes and long lashes and he is really fair!" I grimaced at yet another falsehood. The tone of your voice suggested to me that you were attempting to convince yourself of this fantasy. It was painful to experience this "whitewashing" process.

And so I was witness to the obliteration of a part of this young man's ethnic heritage, his history, his culture, his ancestry and a whole lot

of history and culture. He deserves to be respected for who he is. While this utter fabrication might make him more "socially acceptable" or otherwise worthy of dating in your estimation, the truth of his ethnic heritage should never be denied. It is unkind, unjust, unwarranted and corrosive to your relationship with him. The foundation of this friendship is cracked severely. Will you choose to mend it?

I value you, Will! This note is not intended to be nasty or preachy, but an invitation to reconsider your actions. Be honest with yourself about this situation. Don't delude or rationalize yourself into believing that which is a lie. After you have come to terms with the reality of the situation, do not be ashamed to tell your mother the truth. In so doing you will truly honor your friendship with Russell. He deserves nothing less and neither do you.

■ DINYAR MEHTA is a member of Portland Gay Men Writing. He believes that one should, above all, let your aim be what is true, what is great and what is beautiful.