

hard-won and completely rooted in my everyday life. I can't sing. My hand and eye coordination is terrible; I'm legally blind for driving purposes. I am way past young, not very healthy, born working-poor and fighting hard to acquire a middle-class patina, but seem unable to change any of my working-class attitudes and convictions. I have never been monogamous, except in a de facto fashion these last few years when I just don't have the time and energy for any serious flirting. Contrary to rumor and assumption, I don't hate men. I have never found them sexually interesting, though. I cannot imagine falling in love with a man. Nor do I believe that sexual orientation is something one can construct, that people can just decide to be lesbians or decide not to be—for political, religious, or philosophical reasons—no matter how powerful. I don't know if sexual preference and identity is genetic or socially constructed. I suspect it's partly both, but I do believe that there are people who are queer and people who are not, and that forcing someone to change their innate orientation is a crime—whether that orientation is homosexuality, lesbianism, bisexuality, or heterosexuality. I believe that sexual desire is a powerful emotion and a healthy one. I'm pretty sure that when anyone acknowledges and acts on their desire, it does us all some good—even if only by giving other people permission to act on their desire—that it is sexual repression that warps desire and hurts people.

All of these statements sound very simple, almost trivial, but it is a simple fact that telling the truth, making simple statements of fact about your identity and beliefs—particularly when they don't match up with existing social prejudices—can get people attacked, maligned, or murdered.

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Talking to Straight People

In 1981, three of us went to Yale. We went as the guests of our friend Jean, who was teaching a class in Issues for Contemporary Women and asked us if we would be willing to come up from the City and be visiting lesbians for her students. Stephanie, Claudia, and I had agreed easily. We thought the idea of being imported lesbians for Jean's class hilarious, an adventure, kind of like being outside agitators from an earlier era. On the train we teased each other about our qualifications for the role, and then nervously addressed the matter of what questions we might be asked and how we should present ourselves.

"You realize we are about to become these people's idea of female homosexuals," Claudia said to me, and for a moment I wasn't sure if she was teasing or not. Claudia, Stephanie, and Jean are old friends, ex-college buddies, while Stephanie and I had known each other for just over a year. We met when we both took jobs at an arts organization in New York City and discovered that we shared the same critical sense of humor and a similar weakness for sarcastic remarks in staff meetings. I met Jean when Stephanie introduced us, and I liked her immediately. She was the kind of tough, no-nonsense individual I admire. Only Claudia was a mystery to me. I could never tell whether she was serious or making a joke. She had a habit of looking me straight in the eye and still implying that she was somehow not quite serious. Perhaps that's because she thinks partly in Portuguese,

having grown up in Brazil, the daughter of Christian missionaries.

"Wait until Jean comes out to them at the last class," Stephanie laughed. "That might shake them up, if they don't know already."

"Oh, if only these straight people realized how many of us there are in the world."

"We don't know how many of us there are. There might even be a dyke or two in Jean's class, and we'll never know."

"Don't get too passionate about it," Steph warned. "From what Jean said, it's a pretty small class—around a dozen."

"Then they're not going to gang up on us." Claudia looked like she was ready to giggle. "They're going to be scared of us. We're going to be the big, bad lesbians from New York City."

"Not too bad, please." Stephanie looked uncomfortable. "I don't want you telling lies about all the women you wished you'd slept with."

I just smiled. The wrinkle in Jean's plan was the simple detail that Stephanie and Jean have been lovers on and off for years, but when we got in the classroom they were going to pretend just to be good friends. I wasn't sure they could pull this off. Actually, I was nervous about all of them. I'd done this performance before, spoken on feminism and sexuality at everything from Sunday school meetings to juvenile detention centers, but Claudia and Stephanie hadn't, and Jean was a teacher with that attendant aura of untouchable authority. I worried that they were going to become self-conscious or defensive when the questions got personal, and I was pretty sure that people always got personal on the subject of lesbian sexuality.

"What's Jean's position in the school?" I asked. "They know she's queer, right? And she thinks this is a good idea?"

"Jean knows what she's doing," Steph told me. "She's a great teacher, award-winning and all that, and she says this is a really terrific bunch. It's mostly older people getting back into school after working or raising families, lots of women. So far they've done well with Gladys—you know, the lawyer for the sexual harassment program—and Abby, who did a really tough presentation on Black

feminism. They're not going to come undone over a few dykes. Besides," she added, "if anybody does get smart, I'll just turn on my Bella Abzug run-em-over act and blow them away."

"Oh, sure," I laughed. Steph looks so sweet and mild-mannered, like a Jewish female version of Clark Kent. It's hard to imagine her switch to superdyke, which is why when she actually does turn on that fast-talking, emotional bulldozer self, she is so effective. I'd seen her reduce kissy-mouthed New York construction workers to open-mouthed stuttering boys.

"Don't worry," Steph kept repeating, "they're going to love us."

"You realize," I had warned Steph when we'd first discussed the trip, "I have been known to say inappropriate things, particularly when I lose my temper."

"You are not going to lose your temper," she told me. "We're just going to talk about ourselves, let them know what lesbians are like as real people."

It had sounded fine at first, but on the train up to New Haven, we reconsidered. After all, Claudia pointed out, there were only three of us to represent all the lesbians in the world. Stephanie nodded, looking suddenly pale and uncertain. "Yeah, they're gonna think whatever we say applies to every lesbian they ever meet. We could really screw up, guys."

Claudia pulled out a notebook and started making lists. "I think we should choose which aspect of ourselves we want to emphasize. I can talk about growing up in Brazil."

"Just don't get off on your parents. This isn't supposed to be about your critique of Imperialist Christianity."

"Well, don't you start going on about all that Yankees don't know about Southerners."

"All right. All right."

Steph took Claudia's notebook. "I think this will be easy. We can exaggerate our personalities a little, not repeat the same stuff, and really make some strong points. How about you be the radical fem-

inist activist, make the political arguments, and I be the romantic barfly?"

"Oh, no," I laughed. "I don't think you know how to do that one."

"I'm as much a romantic as you are. Besides, all they're going to want to talk about is sex and relationships."

"No, it's Yale. They're going to have an analysis."

"Well, I don't care." Claudia looked like she was losing patience with the whole plan. "I'm going to talk about my own life. They need to know that there are lesbians who are still lesbians even when they're not involved in a relationship. Might be an antidote to all that romanticism you two talk all the time."

"Well, don't get tragic." Steph started putting away her list. "We're coming into the station." She looked over at me. "You think it's all right if I play the romantic, the one who's done it all for love?"

"Why not?" I grinned over at Claudia. "What do you think, should I go into detail about how much I mess around?"

"Who could stop you?"

Jean picked us up in her ancient Chevy station wagon with the blanket seat covers. She looked eminently respectable in her dress-for-success pantsuit and betrayed not a shred of nervousness. Giving Steph a quick kiss, she hurried us into the car and off toward campus. "You guys are late," she explained. "We've got to hurry."

"Well, we've talked it all out and know what we're gonna do." Claudia pulled her brush out and started working on her tangled hair. "I've even got a little list. Want to tell them about the time I was let go and couldn't prove they picked me first 'cause I was a dyke."

"Queer jokes," I said. "I want to talk about what it's like to have to listen to straight people's ideas of what's funny about us."

"Oh, God, I'm nervous as a cat. Think I need a drink."

"Oh, let's not play into that. They think we're all alcoholics as it is."

"Come on you guys." Jean was almost laughing, but keeping

her eyes on the road. "You sound like you're scared to death. This is going to be fun."

Yale made the back of my neck go tight. The place looked like a Disney version of a Gothic compound, massive stonework and bushy ivy. "Bet they turn out a lot of lawyers here," I told Claudia. "Business administrators," she said, but Stephanie snorted at us.

"Nothing so predictable." Her hand drew a circle around Jean's head and her own. "We're what you get here, too. Philosophers, language scholars, social workers, English majors, a few women's studies rebels, everything you can imagine—along with the second sons of the rich and powerful."

I looked up as we drove under yet another stone arch. "Where do the first sons go?" I asked.

Stephanie and Jean replied in unison, "Harvrrrrrd!" drawing the word out in a parody of a Boston accent. Claudia and I both laughed, and for the first time, we all relaxed.

The class was almost an anticlimax. There were fewer than a dozen people there, and it was more a conversation than a confrontation. One young woman had brought her sister, who stared at us intensely but said nothing. One of the two men in the class came in late, dressed in a three-piece suit and shiny shoes. He blushed pink as soon as Jean introduced us, and stayed pink until he left. But the two older women kept telling us how happy they were we had made the trip.

"My niece is a lesbian," one of them said with a tentative expression and no little pride. She looked around at her classmates as if she expected them to be shocked. "She lives out in San Francisco and every year she rides a motorcycle in the Gay Pride parade there. This year she sent me a picture to prove it." She passed the photo around and seemed disappointed that no one expressed any recognition—or shock. When the snapshot came to me, I glanced down to see a skinny intense-looking young woman in a fringed leather vest. The girl's hair was shaved close to her head. Her left

ear seemed completely encrusted in earrings.

“Quite striking,” I said, and was rewarded with a huge beaming smile.

None of us looked as exotic as the woman’s niece, and I could see that some of the students were disappointed at that fact. It reminded me of the last time I went home to see my sister. Her little girl wanted to know what happened to the woman I was dating with the purple hair. My mama had showed them a picture of the two of us in the New York Gay Pride march, for which my friend Leslie had bleached and tinted her high, bushy Mohawk. The photo had made Mama laugh at the same time it completely fascinated all the children in the family. “Bring her home,” they insisted. “We want to meet the one with the hair.” If I had wanted to make them all completely happy, I should have bleached and two-toned my own hair. Neighbors would have probably come around from blocks away, and my nieces would have taken me to school for show-and-tell. Like Jean’s students, my sisters’ children always seem disappointed that I look “normal.”

Reflexively, I started telling that story to Jean’s class and saw smiles and nods go around the room. In a moment, everyone was talking. Our careful planning evaporated. Stephanie forgot she was supposed to be the romantic and started discussing political theory. Claudia talked so quietly and so intently about her childhood that all the women in the class were leaning forward to hear her every word. I kept waiting for someone to ask us, “But what do you do in bed?” They were too sophisticated for that, though, which meant I didn’t get to pronounce my slow drawl of “Everything!”

They did hit all the other old familiar questions. “Were you ever involved with a man?” “Do you believe in true love?” “Do you want children?” “Do you hate men?” I liked the one about true love, but it was man-hating that got the discussion hot. As soon as it came up, one of the older women snapped, “Oh come on! How can you ask that?”

Claudia waved one hand in the air to get everyone’s attention.

“I think that’s a myth,” she announced. “There is no lesbian in the world that could hate men the way straight women do.” She told me later that she was about to add, “They have so much more opportunity,” but before she could say anything else, one of the students jumped in. “Maybe lesbians have more room to see men dispassionately, not having to fight them off all the time.”

“Oh, you think?” Stephanie looked suddenly flushed. “Most men don’t know we’re lesbians. Most men think we’re just like every other woman they’ve ever met—prey.”

“Oh, come on now.” The pink-faced guy in the suit looked almost hurt. “You talk like men act like dogs all the time.”

“They do.” It was the woman sitting next to him, and her voice dripped venom.

“Exactly.” This time it was an equally flushed young woman on the other side of the room.

Jean stepped in. “I think,” she said in her soft firm voice, “we might just agree that this is a very difficult time for men and women to have comfortable relationships.”

“That’s a fact,” said one of the women in the print dresses. “Way things are, it’s a wonder any of us ever hook up at all.”

I looked around the room at all the nodding flushed pink faces, and for the first time in my life began to consider how hard it must be to be heterosexual. To my right, Stephanie and Claudia seemed as if they might be thinking much the same thing. Claudia dropped her chin and stage-whispered to me, “Sure am glad I’m a lesbian.” There was a moment’s silence, and then the whole room began to laugh in response.

Curiously, the more rational, friendly, and open the discussion became, the more disappointed I was. It felt as if our energy and worry had been wasted. Also, I realized that throughout our surprisingly comfortable performance, Stephanie was very carefully not looking at Jean, and Jean, equally carefully, was not putting any direct questions to Steph. The students smiled and nodded, as if the whole subject of lesbians and lesbianism was interesting but not ter-

ribly exceptional. I might have felt the same way, except for the fact that Jean still hadn't told them she was a lesbian, and certainly had no intention of bringing them face to face with the idea of Stephanie as her one-time lover. I found myself trying to imagine a context in which a homosexual community would import a little group of polite well-behaved heterosexuals to debunk all our myths about them. Surely we have some myths about them, I thought, watching a woman still fingering that snapshot of the San Francisco Dyke. But they're not in hiding. We are the aliens in their country, not they in ours, studying them constantly for the simple necessity of our own survival.

When straight people wear their tolerant expressions, I am reminded of Baptist Sunday school sermons from when I was a child in South Carolina. The preacher would talk about hating the sin but not the sinner, a line that has since become a cliché, but one that even back then I did not trust. I remember watching his face, shiny-pink and stern, and knowing that he did not make any such distinction. It was like the conversation I had with a relatively mild conservative lady from Houston. She was looking at the table of feminist journals I was selling and looking at me with the most awkward expression of polite distaste.

"I know," she said, "you must be a fine young woman, and you think you can't help yourself." Her face was very patient, very Christian. "But my dear," she concluded, "I will always think your life is a tragedy."

I couldn't help myself. I leaned forward and deliberately touched her, taking her hand. "I understand," I said. "And it's sad. That's just what I could say to you."

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Femme

"I'm in my femme phase," I always tell them. And they look back at me, those women with the muscley arms and indifferent expressions—at the hair swinging on my shoulders, my two-inch glass dangle earrings, and the silver filigree chain around my throat—and, to a woman, they smile. Each is sure she understands just what I mean. I always sip my wine and grin, knowing they understand nothing at all, and for once not really caring. None of them takes note of the garrison belt cinching in my shorts, the thick silver ring on my left little finger, the narrow glance I give them over my grin. These are such polite women, mostly "political" in that way only lesbian-feminists of a certain age can claim to be. They are so soft-spoken that they seem almost nonsexual to me, and half their charm revealed when they prove how wrong I am.

There isn't one among them who understands what I am really saying when I speak in that code, when I swing my hair and talk about how femme I've become.

I used to code it, say, "I like my women tough." I would be down at the women's bookstore sipping seltzer and hanging out before the reading began. Or over at the clinic leaning back in a plastic chair after an hour of fruitless waiting for a doctor. Or in the showers at the gym, squatting down to rest my thighs after trying