WE WEAR THE MASK

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Among the Heterosexuals

I admire Nora Ephron. For over a decade I have assigned her brilliant essay on not being Dorothy Parker in every creative-nonfiction class I have taught. But when the word “passing” comes to mind—a charged word that suggests deceit around racial identity or sexual orientation—I think of her.

Not that Ephron passed for anything. To me she was as pure and authentic as a person could be. But in 1985, when I was a young writer at Newsday, I was not so pure and authentic. Nor had I yet published any critically acclaimed books. Ephron had no reason to befriend me, as she would ten years later, when my book, Forever Barbie: The Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll, came out. Ephron put a Barbie doll in one of her movies. We stayed in touch until her death.

In 1985 I was an unknown, struggling to do a story about women and comedy pegged to the opening of Lily Tomlin’s one-woman show on Broadway. No one considered important would talk to me. I was, however, living with an influential man, who asked his friend, the novelist Joseph Heller, to nudge Ephron to speak with me by phone, which she did.

At first we spoke in general terms about comedy. “If you slip on a banana,” she told me, “other people can make fun of you. But if you tell the story about slipping, you own the story. It’s your joke now.”

We moved on to Tomlin, whom Ephron esteemed, talking about her curious commitment to keeping her lesbianism a secret. I had heard that Tomlin had been up for a part in Silkwood, the 1983 movie that Ephron wrote with Alice Arlen and that Mike Nichols had directed. Ephron confirmed that Tomlin was considered for the part of Dolly Pelliker, a lesbian who shared a house with nuclear whistleblower Karen Silkwood, the title character, played by Meryl Streep, and her boyfriend, Drew Stephens, portrayed by Kurt Russell. Then Ephron starkly explained the director’s choice: “We didn’t want one who was one to play one.”

My jaw dropped. Actually, it didn’t drop—and such drop- ping would not have mattered, as we were on the phone. I was as composed as a rock. But I felt something inside me sink.

In this moment I began to understand the tawdry word: passing. I understood that it allowed people to assume I was a member of a privileged group—in this case white arty heterosexuals who summer in the Hamptons. If Ephron had had the vaguest clue that I might have been a lesbian—that I was recovering from the recent random murder of a woman I had deeply loved—she would never, ever have used such cavalier language. She would have been gracious and sensitive, because she was gracious and sensitive. But there I was—a pretty white twentysomething apparently about to marry a successful man with an antiquarian business in the city and many clients in eastern Long Island. She made an obvious assumption. I had “passed.” I had

a window into a world I wasn't sure I wanted to see.

Blessedly, much has changed since 1985, and few in educated circles engage in casual homophobia, though I am still often shocked by the crude, anonymous comments on the Internet. Al- though there are exceptions, in civilized company, both straight and gay people struggle to avoid transphobia. The '70s and '80s, however, were a brutal, discriminatory time. Few people thought twice about using raw language to express bigoted ideas. My story is set in the '80s, and it may be as much about that decade as it is about me. I didn't slip on a banana peel. My story isn't hilarious. But I took Ephron's advice: I own this story. I don't want it told uncharitably by an outsider.

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Passing involves deliberateness, which makes my authentic yet conflicted foray into heterosexuality all the more confusing, and maybe even sad. Passing is studied and intentional. I know this because I once tried to pass as something that I wasn't. As a Yale freshman from an undistinguished West Coast public high school, I tried to be a chameleon. I didn't throw away the embroidered peasant blouses and denim bellbottoms that I had worn at home. I kept them to pass with hippie-identified Yalies. But being a flawed person, a person who had read This Side of Paradise way more often than a peasant child should, I was intrigued by the upper tiers of Ivy League society—the glittering private school kids, who stood out in part because of the rigid coding of their clothes. They wore things I had never even seen in the surfer-hippie slum where I grew up: Top-Siders, duck boots, pastel polo shirts with small embroidered alligators, and Fair Isle sweaters that looked, when new, as if a small animal had been trapped inside and stretched random sections of wool in a fierce effort to get out.

In October of freshman year, a well-meaning but blunt-spoken acquaintance from Farmington (or another women's boarding school—I could not keep track of them back then) buttonholed me outside my residence hall. "Don't take this the wrong way," she said. "I like you. You have a lot going for you. But you're not in California anymore. You need to stop dressing like a migrant farmworker." Yes, I know: no socially conscious undergraduate in 2016 would use "migrant farmworker" as a casual slur. But this was 1973. I let her take me shopping.

We went to J. Press, a fusty emporium unchanged since the 1930s. But I might be misremembering. Coeducation was so new back then that few old-line stores stocked women's clothes. Eventually, I lugged home a boxy Fair Isle sweater, several oxford-cloth shirts, and khakis. Then we hit the mall for a black cocktail dress and unassuming pumps, to replace the unsafe plat- form heels that my fashion arbiter had pronounced "preposterous." A man who regularly wore multiple Lacoste shirts at the same time had invited me to a dance at the Fence Club, a museum of prep life in the 1950s, a bastion against the left-wing politics of Yale during Watergate. As you might imagine, I did not seamlessly fit in. But I at least looked the part. And through a miracle of fate—I had had to take ballroom dancing lessons in junior high—I even managed to pass on the dance floor. But passing, as Professor Henry Higgins knows well, is as much about attitude as appearance. I could never cultivate the insouciance that comes from having a million-dollar trust fund. I felt as if I had my financial aid forms pinned to my clothes. It's not as if my classmates routinely set fire to hundred-dollar bills when they were bored. They didn't have to. They just ignored the prices on menus. Money was always there, insulating them, like the soft down in their L.L. Bean quilted vests.

As it happened, my date that night was also passing—as straight. Or maybe he was still figuring out his sexuality. Our common plight would later bring us together. But I am getting ahead of the story.

Talk about insouciance. Young people today have no clue how difficult it was to be homosexual in the 1970s and ’80s. I was both envious and aghast recently when the twenty-four-year-old actress Kristen Stewart, unabashedly in a relationship with a woman, refused to identify as lesbian or bisexual. She told Nylon magazine, “There are going to be a whole lot more people who don’t think it’s necessary to figure out if you’re gay or straight. It’s like, just do your thing.”

Do your thing. Jesus. In a mere thirty years, a quirk of biology that had traumatized millions and drove hundreds more to suicide was reduced by this young person to a giant yawn. I remember freaking out in high school when I watched the 1961 adaptation of Lillian Hellman’s The Children’s Hour on late-night TV. In the movie, a malicious child falsely accuses two teachers at a girls’ school of being lesbians. No one challenges the child. But the teachers—played by Shirley MacLaine and Audrey Hepburn—are censured. MacLaine’s character flips out, then does what lesbians usually did in movies from that era. She hangs herself. Interviewed for the 1995 documentary The Celluloid Closet, MacLaine pointed out that the scene would doubtless have sparked protests today. Back then, however, no one questioned it. “Audrey and I didn’t even discuss it,” MacLaine recalled. It was one of those givens. You’re a lesbian. You kill yourself.

The poison wasn’t just in popular culture. Some bigots tried to use the law against gay people and lesbians. In 1978 a conservative California state legislator championed the Briggs Initiative—a law that would have banned gays, lesbians, and possibly anyone who endorsed gay rights from teaching in California public schools. Blessedly, Californians voted down the law. But it was part of an increasingly paranoid, allegedly religious movement to persecute gay people as they began to get a few basic rights. In 1977 the Dade County Commission in Florida established a law protecting gays from discrimination in hiring and housing. Anita Bryant, a former Miss Oklahoma, Miami resident, and singer with a contract to promote Florida orange juice, reacted with extreme panic to this law. In a 1977 interview with television journalist Barbara Howar, she announced that God had called her personally to stop gays from “recruiting” young people into their way of life. She called her campaign Save Our Children. In the interview, which is available on YouTube, Howar asks Bryant: “Where is your human sense of decency and fairness to people who are different from you?”

Bryant scowls, and returns to her anxiety about children: “Better to burn the school down rather than allow them to be taught by homosexuals.”

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The malignant propaganda did its job. Any erotic feelings I might have had for women were suppressed in favor of “appropriate” feelings toward men. Initially, this made for a good time at Yale. Unlike the conformist losers in high school, Ivy League men liked smart women. I liked being liked. My boyfriends opened worlds to me. One brought me into his circle of friends—including Manhattanites whose parents had written books I admired. Another introduced me to opera. Yet another, who worked on Yale Daily News, encouraged me to contribute articles and political cartoons to the paper. They were all Jews, and I felt woefully inadequate as a gentile. But my life was on track. Until something as unanticipated as a meteorite collided with it: I fell in love with a woman.

This was awful and wonderful at the same time. Surrendering control terrified me. I thought of her more than I thought of my work. I sketched her face from memory in the margins of my lecture notes. I signed my cartoons with an affected scribble that the legendary cartoonist Pat Oliphant had helped me to design. One night, after she had been

working in my room, I found pages of scratch paper on which she had practiced and perfected the scrawl. She and I spent hours talking about writing, which was what we both aspired to do—never mind that my immediate objective involved working as a political cartoonist. For a long time, talking was all we did. Because she too was ambitious, and being gay could wreck a career. We apologized if we accidentally brushed against one another. Until a night came when we stopped apologizing.

She was the first woman with whom I had a sexual relation- ship. I am being deliberately vague about her identity because I fear a nuisance lawsuit from her powerful family. When we finally got together, I had graduated and was living in Manhattan, working at what I thought would be my dream job: political cartoonist for Newsday. She had another year in New Haven, during which we continued to see each other. But after her graduation, when the best job offer she received was on the West Coast, we tried to do a damaging, '70s-era thing: maintain our tie to one another while still dating men.

To suggest that this was painful is an understatement. After what struck me as a horrific betrayal, I stopped writing letters and talking to her. Superficial relationships were fine. But I couldn't bear the idea of her having an intellectually intimate relationship with someone—male or female—other than me. To protect my- self, I took up with a new man, another writer. Eventually she broke our icy silence, beginning to ease my hurt and enmity. "We need to talk," she told me on the phone, "about what this relationship is—and isn't. And we need to talk in person."

She proposed to fly to New York for my birthday, November 18, and spend the day with me. I was prepared to be let down, brushed off, dumped. I was prepared to be disappointed. But I was not prepared for what actually happened. On November 12, she was killed at point-blank range in a botched mugging. This occurred outside a restaurant in Venice, California, then a run-down neighborhood controlled by street gangs. She was dining with a man who had written her a recommendation for a grant. The news reports—which I could not then bear to read and have only recently found on microfilm—indicated her suffering was brief. Of this I am envious. My suffering, in various permutations, continues to this day.

Many are familiar with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. I would add: vodka, which tends to supersede the others. Denial was useless. She had bled out in the street. Bargaining too— resurrection was off the table. I didn't feel anger until recently, when I read in the microfilm clips that only one of her two killers expressed remorse.

The thing about having an actual gay relationship when you are gay is that you finally figure out what all the fuss had been about sex. Why the pop songs describe euphoria. What it means to have dopamine overload. How the delicate curve of a lightly freckled nose can set off an explosion of joy. Depression, predict- ably, made me lose touch with all pleasure. I oozed sadness. It followed me like a snail trail. The Roman Catholic Church, which had previously sustained me, plunged me into self-loathing. I couldn't banish images from The Children's Hour. If only she and I had had our talk—and I had gained some resolution, even disappointing resolution. I associated my sexuality with random murder and death. If I had felt myself attracted to a woman in New York, I would have moved to another continent.

I leaned heavily on my gay male friends, including the one who had brought me to the Fence Club dance all those many years ago. I would join them in groups—easily penetrating the velvet ropes of Studio 54 in a cluster of beautiful young men. I sat in the balcony and watched them on the dance

floor. I wanted to be loved. I needed to be loved. But I couldn't bear the idea of being touched.

Then one guy—a guy who used his charm like a wrecking ball—broke through. I met my future husband at a bon voyage party given by a crazy person—or, in any event, a meek, unstable copyeditor who was winsome when she took her meds and hospitalized against her will when she didn't. She was sailing soon on the QE2 and wanted to show off the outfits she had bought for the cruise.

The party, as one might have imagined, was filled with "nice" people—people whose sense of self derived from "supporting" those who were not in a position to advance their careers. In those days, newspapers didn't attract nice people. Thus the party was small. The man I had dragooned into accompanying me slipped out after one drink. I found myself pressed into a corner by another young man who did not lack for confidence.

He identified himself as a rare-book and manuscript dealer and began dropping the names of important authors. We swatted pretensions back and forth for a while, and I felt my depression lift. Well, slightly lift. I was drawn to this man's world—a world where one could touch letters written by James Joyce, turn pages of manuscripts by Vladimir Nabokov, caress a volume of Samuel Johnson's Dictionary. The young man also looked uncannily like a male version of my dead lover. Something stirred. "What I've been trying to find," I stupidly blurted, "is a first edition of Lewis's The Apes of God."

"That's a hard one," he told me. "But I'll do my best." The guests began to depart, and I was among them. The hostess would have no viewers for her cruise wear. Until the young man volunteered to stay. Thoughtful gesture. But I still never expected to hear from him.

The Wednesday after the Saturday of the party, he rang. "I have your book," he said.

I was flustered, audibly broke. "How much will it cost?" I asked.

"I'd love to trade for an original but that's only if you'll have dinner with me on Saturday." We had many more dinners. He brought many more presents, including two signed George Grosz lithographs. I had done my senior thesis on George Grosz. I was falling hard for this man's world. Soon I felt loved. I felt willing to love. And willing to touch.

Nor did I conceal the reason for my grief. He knew, and if it bothered him, he didn't confront me. When I thought of passing as a WASP, I thought of clothes. But I don't remember plotting to wear girly things for my ex-husband. So-called sexy lingerie made me feel foolish. I'd say something hilarious about the getup; he'd laugh, and the mood would die. I owned several Jil Sander pantsuits that telegraphed a certain Germanic androgyny. I cut my hair short. I felt comfortable in the androgynous clothes because I thought they projected my complex identity. Yes, I wore a wedding ring. But I also wore hard, angular black suits and crisp oxfords with heels.

I was deep in the closet when the AIDS epidemic struck. I did not join ACT UP, though many lesbians did. Instead I volunteered to work on the AIDS hotline at St. Clare's Hospital. If I had a dollar for every time I heard the word "fag," I could have retired years ago. I even stumbled on it in my own journal. I learned to hold my tongue at parties that were given by the demand side of my ex-husband's business. Rich straight men were oddly frightened of the disease; one advocated putting people with HIV in camps. Only once—after way too much champagne—did I lose it, ranting about the way President Reagan refused to use the acronym AIDS until a speech in 1987, more than five years into the

epidemic. My hosts rolled their eyes. My ex-husband—who agreed with me in private but not in front of clients—glared. I was not invited back.

To get through these parties, I drank a lot. Possibly too much. So in 1995 I stopped drinking. The official pretext was to get sober so I could get pregnant. But not drinking brought new problems. Without vodka, I noticed things I had previously ignored—artworks with uncertain provenances in our home, for example (a common problem for collectors). In ten years, I had evolved from a twentysomething paralyzed by the murder of her lover. I was stronger, more capable of independence. And with- out vodka, I wasn't really very heterosexual at all.

In literature, passing often involves short-term gain and long-term regret. You see this in James Weldon Johnson's novel, The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man. Johnson's character, known only as the "ex-colored man," is a biracial musician in the Reconstruction South. After witnessing a horrific lynching, he decides to pass as white to stay alive, which he does, but at the cost of his dream: making ragtime music. In Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway, the title character swaps passion for passing. Be- fore marrying a man, Clarissa Dalloway loves Sally Seton, with a fervor that only afflicts the very young. It was a passion that, Woolf writes, "could only exist between women, between women grown up . . . the charm was overpowering, to her at least, so that she could remember standing in her bedroom at the top of the house holding the hot-water can in her hands and saying aloud, 'She is beneath this roof . . . She is beneath this roof!'"

I felt these losses—the regrets—of these characters and looked to Alfred Kinsey, the great twentieth-century scholar of sex, for comfort.

Not all things are black, nor all things white. It is a fundamental of taxonomy that nature rarely deals with discrete categories. Only the human mind invents categories and tries to force facts into separated pigeonholes. The living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects.

The sooner we learn this concerning sexual behavior, the sooner we shall reach a sound understanding of the realities of sex.

Kinsey understood that sex was a spectrum. I knew I was near the middle of that spectrum. By experimenting with heterosexuality, I was not betraying my tribe. I was expressing a less dominant part of myself. But without vodka, the dominant part was ready to leave her closet.

I fell in love with another woman. My marriage ended, as did the relationship with the woman who had been the catalyst for its demise. I have not chosen partners well in my lesbian career. But I remain hopeful.

Oddly, when I began dating women, I lost interest in androgyny. I felt comfortable looking like a "woman." I didn't fear being identified as the property of a man. Perhaps because I had moved from New York to Los Angeles—a city of glittering surfaces—I pampered myself with regular pedicures and had my toes painted lavender, vermillion, and what a character in Clare Boothe Luce's The Women called "Jungle Red." I grew my hair, finally allowing my stylist to do what LA stylists have been called by the universe to do: make their clients ever more blond. Three years ago, after a decade of being out, I was totally comfortable with female drag. On tour for my recent book about Elizabeth Taylor, I indulged in fashions inspired by the star: black cocktail dresses, silk stockings with seams, and the punishing undergarments necessary to sculpt my flesh into Tayloresque curves.

In a recent essay, Gregory Rodriguez described his own insecurity about the identity he projects, and

the way random strangers gave him miraculous gifts of reassurance. His essay itself—the acknowledgment of this uncertainty—was a gift to me, because I am often unsure about the identity I project.

Rodriguez described delivering a “nutty” talk at the Getty Museum in LA about the Czech photographer Josef Koudelka, an artist he had never met but “whose stark depictions of exile and alienation” he had admired since college.

Afterward, Rodriguez recalled, Koudelka gave him a present: the artist “asserted rather aggressively in his broken English, ‘You are who you are supposed to be. Some people will hate you. Some people will love you. I love you.’”

I dream that a person will one day tell me: “You are who you are supposed to be.”

But I don’t count on it. As you might imagine, I began this essay in the optimistic summer of 2016, when homophobia really did seem to be in decline. In November of that year, however, the presidential election threw a cruel shadow over my country. The president-elect began assembling a cabinet of bizarre, hate-filled creatures, many of whom endorsed “conversion” therapy for gay people and nearly all of whom favored altering federal law to permit discrimination against the LGBT community for “religious” reasons. The clock was turned back even farther than the 1980s. Forced to endure an increasingly diverse nation, a straight white mob rallied around a strongman, who vowed to restore the soul-devouring conformity of the 1950s.

This strongman did not win the popular vote. Millions demonstrated against him. These millions give me hope. In the 1980s I felt alone. Today I feel part of a proud, self-identified group—facing persecution, yet committed to prevail. No longer shamed into passing. Believing—now more than ever: “You are who you are supposed to be.”