

Social Mores of Those who Fear the Unknown

roving

— We oughta get something to eat. It's getting late, Thomas said.

— ...

— But I haven't been in the Village much, so I don't know where to go.

— ...

— You've been here recently, right?

— ...

— Guess we'll stop at the first place that looks appetizing and doesn't break the bank? Sound good to you?

— ...

Rays of late afternoon light, some blocked by the buildings, some attenuated by the trees, shone down on Thomas and Regina, where it was as if individual photons were hitting the couple. Maybe a particle went through Thomas, a wave through Regina; maybe these quantum dif-

ferences explained macroscopic differences; maybe Thomas was intrinsically a collector of particles, Regina a collector of waves; maybe Thomas tried to explain something that he didn't understand.

His arms weary from carrying the shopping bags of the casual-visitor to the city, the legs tired from too many crosstown trips, Thomas decided on silence. Every twenty feet or so he stopped, walked close to a storefront, spied the menu, made a face, and walked back to the sidewalk to where Regina, not making any eye-contact with Thomas, looked straight ahead, waiting impatiently for him to return so they could continue down to the next rejection.

The thought was this: if only they were to go to a new city, perhaps that would fix things. Not a permanent move, of course, but rather a visit, a long-weekend/mini-vacation. Perhaps grazing amongst new environs would flip a switch, turn on the light bulb that would illuminate the book of their relationship, opened precisely to the page with the answer in 72 point Helvetica: **THIS IS THE PROBLEM.**

The solution, however, would have been another matter and would have meant flipping the page.

The ambient light continued to dim, and with it, the writing in the book became harder and harder to perceive until it was gone.

sampling

They had met like many of the couples they knew. Starting the architecture program at the

design school in the fall, they ended up together as partners for the first assignment. Evenings in the library led to late nights in the studio led to early mornings in bed.

— I think we should re-do that section of the atrium, Thomas might say at breakfast. It's not quite perfect.

— Why should we? Regina would reply aggressively. What, it's not perfect as it is? You think we haven't done this to death and that this building isn't something that's truly visionary?

— Well, maybe you're right, but I still think there's more we could do.

— Well, I happen to believe that we've got an amazing piece of work here, and dammed if I'm going to spend another night arguing with you over the height of a doorway!

— All right, you win.

At times like this Thomas would give up, knowing that Regina's personality was oftentimes too powerful for him.

But what might look like fights to others was merely the life of a passionate artistic couple. And the more pronounced the argument, the more intense the makeup sex.

Yet the fights, or "disagreements", as Thomas liked to think of them, didn't form the entirety of their relationship. Many a night was spent with knives hitting cutting boards in the kitchen to make dinner, or Chinese takeout, followed by cheap wine or expensive beer, talking about ar-

chitecture or watching the latest classic film to be released on DVD. These were the times that Thomas enjoyed most: minutes into hours that made him feel entirely comfortable and loving and willing to overlook less agreeable times.

— What about this place? It's called "Little Home".

For the first time in what seemed like hundreds of storefronts, Regina tilted her head in Thomas' direction. She rolled her eyes and curled up the corner of her mouth in the universal sign of indifference.

— You gotta eat here, a woman on a bench just outside the door said. She took a draw from her cigarette. Best Thai food served by hipsters that you've ever had.

Thomas chanced a reach for Regina's hand and found it; instead of an immediate withdrawal all he felt was a slight tensing and then a relaxation. With his other hand he pushed the door open.

selecting

With a combination of paper lanterns, Christmas lights, and booths straight out of a mid-century diner, the interior at least looked like a hipster's apartment. The sign said "Seat Yourself" yet Thomas held back, waiting for Regina to make a move. She cocked her head towards a booth near the rear rather than the table near the front window by the red curtains.

"Do I dare" and "Do I dare"? Those words of T. S. Elliot rang through Thomas' head as the two

of them sat down, paper placemats before them, menus all ready for browsing near the napkins. His unconscious seemed to dare him to do something that it wouldn't reveal, especially with the light so dim in the back of the restaurant.

Graduate student life meant late-night Thai take-out quite often so Thomas knew what he wanted without even looking at the menu.

The waitress came by: ripped stockings, denim cutoffs, kid's medium shirt tight over her chest. A wanna-be punk rocker if there ever was one. Thomas consciously avoided the once over and allowed himself only a polite glance.

— I'll take shrimp curry, spicy, say a five. And shrimp rolls as a side, Regina said.

— And you? the waitress asked Thomas.

The change in Regina's standard order momentarily caused Thomas to space out.

— Um, Pad Thai, a one. Thanks.

Defensively, as if anticipating a question, Regina said,

— I felt like having something different.

waiting

— ...

— ...

— What's up? What's going on? Thomas asked.

— ...

— I don't know what's going on. Maybe I do. Maybe I don't. Why am I the only one talking here?

— ...

— This is absurd.

— What is?

Her two words, the first as a response to something Thomas has said in too many hours, were as if the shiny facade of a two-way mirror had shattered, revealing the truth so recently hidden.

— This, this lack of talking! Come on, we've been together for what, a year now? Has all the time we've spent together brought us full circle, back to a point before we even met, to a point of not speaking?

Thomas was getting agitated.

— You know what's absurd, Regina came back. What's absurd is *us*. A year of a lie.

— A lie? What do you mean?

— You know exactly what I mean.

— No I don't!

— ...

— I can't know what you're talking about without you telling me, Thomas said.

— Lower your voice, dammit. The whole fucking place doesn't have to know that we've got issues.

— So what is it?

— Look, do I have to spell it out for you? What is it? It's you. You always agree with me. We fight, you give in. You give in, we have sex. We have sex, you're on bottom. What kind of relationship is that? You're always deferring to me. I don't know if you think that's some sort of chivalrous thing to do, but goddammit, I like having a man in my life every once in a while.

swallowing

The waitress came by with the dishes and again Thomas averted his eyes, this time not out of custom, but rather because he didn't want someone else to see the tears beginning to fill his eyes. It's as if he had inadvertently ordered his meal as a nine and the spices had overwhelmed him.

Regina didn't look at her plate, nor did she reach for her chopsticks.

— So you know what? It's time I told you the truth: I've had a man in my life for the past two months. And your forgiving, unconditional eyes ignored the signs. That "new smell"? Another man's cologne. My "late nights at the library"? Yeah, I was at the library, but with my skirt hiked up.

The imaginary spices were taking their toll. His throat burned, his eyes burned. Thomas reached for the glass of water to find it empty, only a ring of now-evaporating water at its base. He motioned for the waitress, who passed them in a hurry, and asked for another glass of water.

— Sure, just a sec, she said, oblivious to the drama at table number four.

— Who is it? Thomas asked.

— See, that's what I'm talking about! Regina was careful to keep her voice low, yet the anger was obvious. Any self-respecting man would be enraged and yelling at me right now. But no, you sit there being your calm self and say, "Who is it". Grow a spine for once in your life!

Thinking the noodles might alleviate some of the burning, Thomas took out the chopsticks and began to eat. His hands shook which made grabbing food difficult. Regina heaved a sigh; Thomas knew without looking what her expression would be. She began to eat. Thomas could see the tips of her chopsticks come together accurately, precisely the width needed to lift the shrimp to her lips. He followed the food upwards and into her mouth but he stopped short of looking above her nose.

Without being able to place a finger on it, Thomas had thought for a while that this might be the root of their problems. Regina had been acting distant these past few months, had been spending longer than usual out of the flat. But he hadn't allowed himself to believe that he was being *cheated* on. Such a thing simply didn't enter his worldview.

And in actuality, his relationship with Regina was the best he's ever had. For once Thomas felt understood and cared for.

— What do you have to say to me? Regina interrupted his thin and vulnerable strand of thought. Say something, dammit.

— I'm sorry.

Chopsticks fell from her fingers, the food recently held between landing randomly on the table. Regina's hands continued to be in the form for eating but were suspended in the air. Her look was astonishment mixed with rage.

— What. The. Hell. Do. You. Mean. You're. Sorry.

Her words were punctuated by calculated silence and were barely above a whisper.

— I just mean that I'm sorry that things are ending this way. That it's coming to this, Thomas said meekly. I had hoped for better.

— Yeah, and so had I, Regina said. But looks like we were both wrong.

leaving

With those words, Regina got up from the booth, throwing her napkin haphazardly on the table.

— I'll see you around, she said, more to the air than to Thomas.

He didn't even turn around to see her go, but knew she was gone when the bell above the entrance tinkled once and then again.

— Can I get you anything else? The waitress had come back, and this time Thomas chanced a look at her face. She was attractive in the faux-punk sort of way. Her eyes had a look of understanding, and it was only then that Thomas realized his naïveness in thinking that no one else in the restaurant knew what was going on.

— No, I'll just take the check, thanks.

— Sure, she said. And as an afterthought: — Sorry.

As he left the restaurant he came across the woman smoking on the bench outside.

— Great food, isn't it? She took a long drag on her cigarette.

— Yeah, very good. I'll have to come back, Thomas managed to say. Even now he wasn't able to tell a stranger the truth: that the burning taste in his mouth would remain for a long time.

Instead of heading crosstown to catch an uptown subway to the hotel, he headed downtown to the Chinatown buses for his return up north. Although alone, he had his shirt, pants, a wallet with an ATM card linked to his own bank account. He had good grades and an excellent portfolio.

Yet he also had furniture that was his but wasn't, books that he read but didn't choose; all of this back at the shared flat. He had a year of his life there.

On top of it all, he had a thought. And it was this thought that remained with him through the nighttime ride home. He had some straightening up at the flat to do.