

Cold War

and you might have called it hippie love, but we were four decades late and protesting a different war. I was standing by a tree in Central Park smoking pot, and you were in the crowd holding a sign that said, "War Sucks." You walked up and took the bowl. You put it to your lips. And sometimes that's all it takes.

To say you were beautiful, implying that you were beautiful like all other things that are beautiful, would be a lie but not the kind of lie that passes in the moment. It would be more like "I'm not a crook" or "I did not have sex with that woman, Ms. Lewenski."

You had long dark hair that streaked gold in the sunlight's flashing rays. Your arms trembled, but still you held the sign high. If I was talented, in the way that great men are talented, I would have taken that moment and painted it on a canvas as big as a building or maybe etched it in stone to give civilization hundreds of years from now tangible proof that someone like you did, in fact, exist. But I am not that kind of man.

I should have told you I loved you, but the formality of sex and relationships and everything in between prevented any such thing from being said without first getting your name. You told me your name was Amy and that you went to college at Sarah Lawrence. I still loved you. I loved you more.

At a protest of well over one hundred thousand people, we walked through the crowd, wondering when it would be safe to exhale. My hand was in yours, and I could feel the moist grooves of your palm. I watched the mist leave your mouth and mix with the November chill as we lamented about rights violations against Arab Americans. You told

me about Sarah Lawrence and your dreams of becoming a civil rights attorney. I told you I wanted to be a writer, and you thought that was good. Again, I wanted to tell you I loved you. So I opened my mouth and cleared my throat. You looked up at me with your eyes illuminated against a somber setting. And I just smiled.

We continued to float through the protest until we ended up on a subway. Sitting quietly on the 3 train, the hypnotic drone of wheels on steel enchanted us. We went to your apartment, where I found out the necessary things that a man needs to find out about a woman before he kisses her. You're a huge Ani DiFranco fan. You're originally from Berkley, California. You told me about your twelve-year-old brother and your fear of spiders.

Then I kissed you.

In the corner of the apartment was a small lamp with a thin shade that turned the light from a blinding yellow into a dim orange. The beam stopped short of your bed, which was nothing more than a mattress on the floor. We were two people who weren't big on definitions, yet I found myself wishing I had a Webster's Dictionary handy. And maybe all things in life would ideally be better without definitions. But you were idealistic enough for the both of us. And that was just one more thing I loved about you.

My lips skimmed over your neck. You whispered "I'm scared," and I ignored you, not sure what a man should say when the woman he loves says she's scared. But you have to understand, in that moment, I learned all things celestial and earthly are made from the same material, which wasn't a discovery to take lightly. I clenched your hand, our fingers tangled. We lay there, eyes closed. I heard your breathing; I heard your heart, and yet each one of these separate noises engulfed the other, sinking the room into silence. And men have gone deaf from stillness tamer than that. So I wanted to say something like, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," but I am a writer and have already stolen far too many lines.

Lifetimes passed before I spoke; wars were waged and lost; man traveled to Mars and back before I asked you, "What are you scared of?" Your mouth opened then closed. Your lips shuddered, and I saw your eyes dart back and forth under your eyelids. I slid my fingers through your hair. Tears squeezed out as I waited for the answer, but this was just the first of many silences.

With morning came reality. With reality came definitions, so we became what some people might call boyfriend and girlfriend. We did the things that boyfriends and girlfriends do. We walked through Time Square, arms locked, laughing at the people who bought into the capitalist machine that is Bloomingdale's and Saks 5th Ave. We stayed up late, and I read you my stories. You sat bundled in a quilt drinking tea and staring at me. I sweated and stammered my words, and you leaned over and kissed me. I smiled, and you smiled, and then I continued with more confidence and flair.

This is how it went until a Monday months after the protest. You were sitting at your desk, and I was lying on the floor, working on a story about a man who lived by himself and only ate clam chowder. That's when you looked up from your sociology book and said, "I'm scared... I'm scared because I'm Arab, and Arabs are the new niggers."

I stopped writing but didn't move my eyes from the journal. I had never heard you use that word. We always turned off music that used it, and you yelled at my friend, who one night got drunk and voiced the word relentlessly. To hear you say it put rocks in my stomach. To hear you say it blinded me like an atomic flash. To hear you say it....

You cried mutely, and I felt your tears falling like angels. I said nothing. You put the weight of the world on your shoulders, and I tried to bear as much of that burden for you as I could. When you heard stories of battered woman and news broadcasts about rape victims, you laid in bed and cried into your pillow. When you heard the words

"ethnic cleansing" or "genocide," you froze up. I would have buried myself alive under that weight if it meant you could go one day without the tears, one day without the torture. But in your ideal world, the only person who was allowed to suffer was you. The paradox was every time you suffered, I suffered, too.

After that night, we went on exactly like we had before. We went to bookstores and drank coffee. We snuck into movies. We held hands on the subway. We ate pizza on 111th Street at Famiglia's. We visited Central Park and reminisced about the first day we met. At some point, it seemed like a good idea for me to go with you to Berkley to see your family, so we made the arrangements and bought the appropriate tickets.

The day before the trip, I called you to go over the details. You picked up the phone, and I asked you how your exams had gone. You answered, "Fine." I asked if you were finished packing. You answered, "Yes." I told you I was looking forward to going to California with you. And you didn't say a thing.

At first I was unaware this was becoming a cold war through quiet indifference. But ten seconds passed, and you still hadn't spoken. But the last thing I had said to you wasn't a question. I had only made a statement, and maybe it was wrong for me to expect you to reply with a simple, "I'm looking forward to going to California with you, too," although that did seem the custom. But now twenty seconds had gone by, and I was sure somewhere in the world people were mouthing the words to sad songs. And based on that logic, I decided to play cold war, too. But I had to wonder, was it logic that propelled men up a beach at Normandy? Was it logical for one man to stand in front of a procession of Chinese tanks, facing certain death? And after twenty-five seconds I wanted to scream, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" But every wordless moment that passed, another stone was put in place. And by now, the wall had been up for decades and was covered in graffiti.

And on the thirty-third second I was froze, staring at a microwave clock, thinking about the Gulf War and how it ended in forty-one days. I was thinking about Korea and Vietnam and how they dragged on for so many years. I was thinking about the world wars and how long they lasted. And this war had only been going on for thirty-seven seconds and was already the longest one in history.

Why weren't you responding? What was going through your mind? Were you thinking about the AIDS victims in Africa or the homeless man you saw everyday on your way to class? Those things were such a big part of your life that they killed you a little each day. And that became another thing I didn't want us to share, but that doesn't change the fact that I would have gone to Africa to hold all the dying children until they fell asleep. If I could have, I would have stopped the homeless man from shaking in the cold. I would have fed him and bought him new clothes. But tomorrow, it would be the homeless woman on 111th or the Chechen people being slaughtered by Putin and his army. And things would have gone on this way until all that pain started to kill me, too.

By the eighty-third second, I was ready to end the cold war. So I searched for the words of great men. If I had only spoken softly and carried a big stick, if I had only spoken of a Great Society or if I had a dream, I might have been in your arms that night, looking forward to our upcoming trip, but those were all the words of great men. And a great man I am not. So when I finally did speak, I said, "I have to go." And even as I was saying it, I wondered where it fit in history. Would my words sit on the shelf of your heart next to the words of Mahatma Gandhi and Malcolm X? And when I hung up the phone, I still loved you. And every day since. Even now, the cold war rages on, and I can picture you in the park with your cheeks a gloried red.

Submission Guidelines

We are accepting submissions for Fiction Fix Third Injection Vol. III, due to be published in December 2004. This issue will be open for submissions of short fiction and novel excerpts. Please submit each submission electronically as a Microsoft Word attachment to:

fictionfix@hotmail.com

All manuscripts. . .

Must be anonymous; names should appear in emails only. They must be double spaced with one inch margins and Times New Roman 12 point font. Fiction Fix does not set a word limit, but greater consideration will be given to stories under 3000 words.

The deadline for submissions is June 15, 2004. Submissions received after that date will be considered for the Fourth Injection Vol. IV.

We thank you for contributing to our publication.

The Crew of Fiction Fix

