

Second Person Queer

Who you are (so far)

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An Apology To My Mother

S. Bear Bergman

Dear Mom,

There are a few things I've been meaning to say for some time now, things that you and I have never discussed, and before it goes any further, I have a few things I would like to apologize to you for.

I'm sorry we never got to giggle about boys. I know you were pretty, and popular, and all the boys in the county wanted to take you out when you were a girl, and I know you really were looking forward to talking about dates with me, helping me choose the right top or the right earrings or the right boy for whichever dance, like you got to do.

You would have been good at it, I'm sure, good at all the parts, the talking about boys and sex and curfews and how to tell if a boy liked me and all of those key mother-daughter things. But I didn't really *like* boys, and I was too afraid to tell you until it was too late to see whether those skills could have reasonably translated themselves into the world of dating girls, too.

I never told you about my very first date, which I had with a red-headed girl from California who after one date with me, and one very chaste kiss, went back to her boyfriend in Davis and as far as I know is straight to this day. I never told you about my first time, which was extraordinary, with a beautiful girl on a cold and sunny fall afternoon in her bed at her boarding school when I was seventeen, when we got to take all day and all night and into the next morning; I never told you that it was better than I could have imag-

ined, languorous and delicious and warm under all of her covers, wrapped up together all night. I might not have told you if it was with a boy, either, but I think you would have liked to have known, before now, that my first time having sex was safe and honest and everything else you might have hoped for, with a girl I loved very much.

I'm sorry about the shopping. I really am. I know you like it, and I know you had high hopes about long shopping trips for pretty things that we would casually lie about the cost of to Dad, punctuated with little lunches at which we would talk about all kinds of things. I'm sorry shopping was always such an ordeal because I hated everything you liked, and almost all of what I fit into, and we always ended up fighting and one of us crying until the miraculous method known as the Lands' End catalog appeared on the scene, but that didn't really have the same sense of bonding, did it?

When I was eighteen I thought that going shopping with you to look at girly things was cause for all-out war, and now nearly thirty I think, eh. How could it hurt? I don't have to buy it. I wish I had humored you a little for all the ways you humored me; I wish I had bent a little bit for as much as you flexed to meet me. The conceits of the young, I guess. But separating seemed so important, I hope you understand, I was never trying to reject what you liked by saying it wasn't good or useful, by making it seem silly or by condescending to it. It just wasn't for me. At the time, it seemed so urgent, so vital, to make sure that I shoved femininity away from me as hard as I could, to protect myself from everything that seemed to come with it, everything I didn't feel comfortable with and still don't. It took the intervening decade and more to see that really? I could have just said, no, thank you.

And I'm sorry that now I'm so afraid of what you'll think that I don't

take you with me when I go shopping for the things that make me feel good and look good; my peculiar blend of clothes, so masculine but hardly ever manly, with my bright colored shirts and ties. I wish I felt sure that when I came out of the dressing room, confident and sharp, you'd look at me with pleasure instead of faint shame, that this is your *daughter*, here, in the necktie. But I don't feel sure. So I don't give you the chance.

I'm very sorry about the big wedding. I know what you imagined, the bridesmaids and the shower and the giggling and my great-grandmother's pearl earrings and lots of people and choosing a wedding dress and shopping for a perfect mother-of-the-bride outfit and picking out china and all of the other business that comes with the wedding process. I keep thinking that maybe we could have made it a little bit more like that, if we'd tried a little harder, instead of the small, perfect, but ultimately frill-free wedding we chose.

All the girl time you didn't get, all the sharing and long brunches and mother-daughter bonding and clashing, all the borrowing of clothes and whatever else is supposed to come with it that you didn't get, I really regret. I feel like my gender cheated you out of something you would have enjoyed enormously, through absolutely no fault of your own.

I know this is late, and there's probably more that I can't think of now. I'm sorry for every time I accused you of not loving me for trying to do what you thought was best. I'm sorry I didn't give you better help in understanding what I was doing, and what I was going through, so you could actually judge what might be best. I got afraid of all the parts of it, all the things I thought you couldn't handle or understand, and I decided the best way to keep things civil between us was to hide most of my life and just interact with you regarding neutral topics. I succeeded in keeping things civil, all right, but I prevented us from getting closer, connecting on a deeper level, because

I didn't trust you to walk with me where I was going. I can't tell you how sorry I am for that.

I love you very much, Mom. I hope you can accept my apologies, and that perhaps we can go forward from here, and see what kind of friendship we could have.

Love always-

S

How Not To Be Offended by Everything: A Guide for Asian Men

by Viet Dinh

First of all, it's not small.

Of the daily insults you endure, this stings the most. Somehow, you ended up on the losing end of the racial/sexual stereotypes. Black men: athletic, virile and well-proportioned. Latin men: fiery, feisty and passionate. Asian men: feminine, submissive and—well, you know.

Perhaps you conform to some of these: you *are* feminine; you *are* a bottom; you *are* fresh off the boat and no speakee English. But stereotypes shouldn't define the entirety of you are. Emphasize the traits that make you particular: your expertise in weaving baskets out of bamboo, your flair for spicing up instant ramen noodles, your unerring eye for gold and jade jewelry. After all, you can't be held responsible for the ignorance of others.

Nonetheless this will happen at least once: you go up to a guy, and he stops you in your tracks: "Sorry. I'm just not into Asians." If you're lucky, it'll only happen once, but be prepared to hear it again and again. You replay the incident in your head until every polite "not interested" or "thanks, but..." becomes an echo of *I'm not into Asians*. Maybe you get angry on behalf of your entire race: who writes off a full half of the world's population? Or maybe you take solace in the meditation techniques of your ancestors: zen, tai chi, *fuk yu suk mai kok*. But it cuts you in ways you can't imagine, and you find yourself staring at someone, wondering *Will he like Asians?* before you wonder *Will he like me?*

Certainly, you can find men who are particularly attracted to Asians—rice queens, they call themselves. You may be suspicious of their motives. Some of the men are older and heavysset: are Asians

their race of last resort? Others wear boyfriends on their arms like colorful bangles; they talk about your exotic skin, your body, your lips, and you wonder if you are merely a blank screen upon which they can cast their colonialist projections. Remember: you don't have to follow any cultural sexual script. Don't limit yourself to being a houseboy, blushing geisha, rickshaw runner, servant boy, china doll, or male mail-order bride. You can also be a computer programmer, laundromat owner, railroad worker, yakuza or Triad member, grocery shopkeep, or—best of all—kung-fu master.

Still, it's nice to be desired without having to face possible humiliation, even if Edward Said rolls in his grave when he sees you together. But don't let rice queens become a crutch. Plenty of men—of all races—aren't prejudiced towards your heritage or what you may or may not be packing in your pants. Or they may simply want a ride in your customized, nitrous-injected Honda. Because if *The Fast and the Furious* has taught you anything, it's that hot men love pimped-out cars.

Potential paramours will ask, "What does your name mean?" Take this as an opportunity to exercise poetic license. Tell him that your name means "Light Morning Mist Rising Off of the Mountain Lake Shenzhou" or "Most Revered Heavenly Brother of the Fifth Celestial Palace." And if he looks at you with disbelief, explain that Asian languages, much like their cars and their workforce, are very efficient.

Maybe he's more cultured. He may have traveled to your country of origin, or studied it, or lived there. But remember, in the end, that he's a *wei-lo*, and don't be afraid to remind him of the fact: "Didn't my grandfather go to war to keep you out of our business?"

But you also need to examine the origins of your own preferences. Instinctively, you know instinctively that desire makes its own demands, that everyone has his peculiar taste, but still—! If you're attracted primarily to white men, you'll hear plenty of explanations

for this. Internalized racism. Cultural imperialism. Yearning for the unattainable. You might blame the media: after years of flipping through magazines and pornography **choked** full of beautiful white men with chiseled white features, you begin to forget what your own face looks like.

Whatever the case, you have to overcome your own jealousies. You're not in a contest to see who can get the richest, whitest, or most handsome boyfriend. When you see another gay Asian and white male couple, think *Good for them!* instead of *That thieving, whoring bitch!* You may have grown up in an ultra-competitive environment, with your parents pushing you to become a doctor or lawyer or electrical engineer. But don't perpetuate this streak; you can leave behind this influence the way you've left behind your mother's nagging voice, asking "Why you no marry nice [ethnicity-appropriate] girl?"

Stand in front of a mirror. Sometimes, you'll wonder if there's any way to escape your own skin, and the answer is always *no*. Sometimes, you'll blame your parents—all those years of piano and violin lessons, and the boys haven't come beating down your door? And sometimes you'll see an okay, flawed human being who knows he needs some work but isn't afraid of thinking things through, even if they don't lead to any definitive answers. You can hold yourself for a moment and realize that it's not small at all. The real problem is that the more you think it's small, the smaller it gets.

Okay, maybe it *is* small. So what? There are worse things. You could be cruel, insensitive, or narcissistic. You could be critical of the faults of others and blind to your own. You could be so consumed with rage that it burns everyone with whom you come into contact. Or could dust yourself off—there are worse injustices in the world—and continue. Find yourself someone who accepts you, faults and all, just as you accept all his faults. Hold him close and discover the different ways in which you grow.

How not to fall for a lesbian celebrity

Joy Parks

Whether you are a seasoned lesbian or a *nouveau sapphist*, chances are high that at some point, you will find yourself in the presence of an actual lesbian celebrity.

This is due to the fact that despite what both the radical Christian right and political buttons from the 1970s may tell you, lesbians do not number all that highly among the general population and no, they are not everywhere.

Lesbians are in fact a rather small, clannish group that tends to congregate within a relatively limited range of locations, which explains why it is far too easy to sleep your way through the tribadist population of a small city in no time flat.

These factors, combined with an uncommonly large percentage of lesbians who pursue careers in literature, music, art or professional sports mean that the odds are good that you will at some time, find yourself in the presence or possibly, the guest bathroom, of a genuine living legend. As a lesbian, and lacking any natural resistance to temptation, you are best advised to take heed as to how to avoid and/or deal with this unfortunate situation when it occurs.

Avoiding the lesbian celebrity

Truly in this situation, the ounce of prevention is not only equal to a pound of cure, it will also help you steer clear of the unpleasant circumstances of having to listen to your friends tell you that they did indeed tell you so.

The most effective way for you to not fall for a lesbian celebrity is to make a concerted effort to not meet one. To accomplish this goal, you must avoid the places in which they congregate. While not all

the lesbians you risk meeting in these locations will be celebrities, you can never be too careful.

Generally speaking, you are best to shun dances organized to raise funds for particular causes, music festivals, jewelry shops that favor pieces made of large abstract chunks of silver and Walt Disney World, especially on school holidays. It will also be necessary to severely curtail your attendance at bookstores, particularly those not associated with the larger chains. This goes doubly for book launches, poetry readings and independent movie screenings. You must avoid them at all costs.

Geographically, you are best to refrain from traveling in a number of highly suspect areas of the country. Avoid California, Oregon and Vermont in their entirety; the state of Michigan mostly in August and the eastern cape of Massachusetts in the later summer and parts of the fall. Madison, Wisconsin no longer exists for you.

If you are the kind that prefers a sweater under an overcoat, to severely reduce your risk factor, you must also avoid all organic food establishments, vegetarian and/or vegan restaurants and entertainment venues frequented by girl ball players.

Note that even if you have faithfully remained miles away from any and all of the locations listed above and you still find yourself within polite conversational distance of a lesbian celebrity, you must at all times remain calm and avoid both small talk and deeper discussions. In particular, any verbal exchange must not contain the following: “while you were reading from your book, singing your song, setting the stage on fire while tap-dancing your performance poem, I felt as if you uncovered my soul. That you were speaking just to me.” First of all, realistically, this would be impossible because the lesbian celebrity does not know you. Furthermore, it is dangerous in that she may actually come to believe that she actually was singing/reading/tap-dancing/soul-uncovering just for you. For a little while anyway.

If you DO fall for a lesbian celebrity

Despite taking of all precautions listed here, if you do find yourself in a position of having fallen for a lesbian celebrity (or having been fallen at *by* a lesbian celebrity), do not panic. There are a number of ways to mitigate any potential damage. Too, you can also take heart in the fact that the relationship probably won't last sufficiently long for you to developing any lasting side effects or scars.

However, at this confusing and trying time in your life, you would do well to abide by the following guidelines.

Tell no one anything...so nothing comes back to haunt you.

You must also resist the urge to write things down. A hastily sketched note, complete with bad grammar, could quite possibly end up as a voiceover segment in someone's independent film.

Remember that while you may be an important person in your right, you are not as important as she is to a very large number of people. Remember this when you call her friends, concerned that she has locked herself her office/studio/car for the last 72 hours, and is threatening bodily harm to herself or anyone who tries to remove her. Chances are they will ask you what you did to provoke the situation.

Always pay for everything. Including your moving expenses. Both ways.

You will be considered a gold digger even if your beloved is a poverty-stricken but really famous poet. So don't make it easy for them. Carry cash.

You must save everything. The brevity of the relationship shouldn't tax the average apartment's storage facilities. Also take good notes. There may be a book in this.

If she's really famous, grab a few personal items of hers on the way out the door. You deserve a nice summer house too.

Breaking up with a lesbian celebrity

You will be amazed at how easy it is to break up with a lesbian celebrity. You need to do absolutely nothing but show up. She will be breaking up with you. Don't take it personally. It's just that celebrities have more options than the rest of us and she will be exercising hers.

You must always keep in mind that imaginative people make the best liars and you should point out any omissions of truth as you find them. Remember that you are not the sacrifice she has to make, that she really doesn't want to give you a normal life (because then she'd be forced to live one) and no, she didn't warn you.

Do not expect to be elevated to art in her next book, song or movie. Chances are if you do happen to be portrayed in her work, you're not going to find it flattering. In fact you may wish to avoid the rush and retain a lawyer immediately.

On no uncertain terms following the breakup should you enter the same profession or one even vaguely related to your famous ex's. If you make a success of it (and you no doubt will, now that you actually have something to say that people want to know about), no one will ever believe that you made it on your own. This mistrust will be compounded if your ex's rolodex/address book/PDA went missing for even the briefest period of time during the relationship.

And finally, remember that you are not alone. The people who got extremely weary of listening to how cool and down-to-earth she was while you were together will never tire of hearing about her uncertain hygiene, bad table manners, money problems or lack of skill in bed.