

Cruel Elitism!

Toward the end of my first year at Oxford, I had a witty, literary, counter-culture boyfriend. He introduced me to the writings of Beckett, Nietzsche, and Borges; and to the philosophy of Sartre. He liked to have me accompany him to events he wished to attend, but was very bored, or a no-show, at events I wished to attend. He once fell asleep during the movie "The Sting," which I had already seen but had suggested to him I thought he would enjoy. Apparently, he thought he was doing me a favor by accompanying me to this movie, and that there was no need for him actually to watch it. (I recently saw it listed as an academy-award winner.)

One day, a friend of his noticed me in the company of another man-friend, wheeling bikes across the street – not even hand in hand. The next time I arrived at my boyfriend's house, which he shared with a group of young men, the biggest womanizer among them said, "Where is the other man today?" I replied, casually, "Oh, I phased him out this evening." Everyone got the point, except the womanizer's girl-friend. She looked bewildered, as though she sensed there were a joke, but its meaning was obscure to her.

Then, another of the young men, on his way to a career as a stockbroker, said to me, "If I were you, I'd commit suicide." I felt as though he had been holding this insult until a moment arose when he might enjoy using it. I did my best not to react, but I did wonder whether I might actually have done something to deserve it. My best thoughts in that regard were that I had made little attempt to get to know my boyfriend's friends – as they had made little attempt to get to know me – and that it might have been unwise for me to have acted as though I casually accepted the womanizer's judgment of me, in order to make a point.

I did not expect that they would assume I was guilty. The "other man" was fully aware that I had a boyfriend, and that it was not himself. I had started spending more time with this other friend, after he recommended that I watch the movie, "Cabaret," which he had already seen and did not need to see again. I invited my boyfriend to accompany me; he replied, "maybe," and then stood me up.

This is only one of several examples in which the culture at Oxford was not so friendly. There were many who were too busy to be interested in anyone but those who might help them advance their status in one way or another. And, apart from this general thoughtlessness, there were some who made a sport of looking down on others, or mocking or scorning them. Or, who offered me a society "in," with unspoken strings attached.

My perspective on male-female relations, at the time, was that young people can do foolish or inconsiderate things, but there is no call to find the behavior of a womanizer socially acceptable, and my behavior worth a major insult. I had not deliberately deceived my boyfriend, as I suspect the womanizer was doing to his lady friends. Rather, I did not think my boyfriend cared how I spent my time when I was not with him. I would have been glad to tell him many things about how I thought and felt, and what I liked to do, had he asked me.

This perspective sharpened when, a few years later, I was newly married (and newly arrived in the U.S.) and a graduate student among other graduate students, most of whom were not married. I was looking forward to making friends among my fellow students. Yet, it soon appeared that I was being shut out of the department's social life. I suspected it was because one of the young single men found me attractive. One day, I plucked up my courage to call him and ask him, "Was it something I did?" He replied, "No, no," as if the idea were ridiculous. I had the impression that it had never crossed his mind that my reputation might suffer as a result of his carelessness and, perhaps, any lies or half-truths he may have told in order to protect his ego.

I also had the impression that, rather than whispers and gossip, I had been the victim of people just carrying on with their lives – neither noticing nor caring that I was in a difficult situation; that is, I both wanted to be included and didn't want to draw attention to something uncomfortable. But perhaps I was mistaken! Perhaps they were of the "live and let live" frame of mind, and it would have been OK with them for a married woman and her TA to flirt in front of everyone. Yet, I didn't think he and I were being judged equally, or would be judged equally, if the matter were being discussed, about which I remain uncertain.