

Joanna Russ, 46 Highland Ave., Binghamton, N.Y. 13905

14 May 1975

Dear Tip,

Don't worry. I'm only dying. No, I'm not.

Who, in Heaven's name unleashed Chiang Kai Shek?

Actually I was watching TV and saw that I indeed had all Eight Symptoms of Nervous Stress (it's so cute the way they number them, like the Readers Digest). ALL. And the lactose business makes some difference but not much. Anyway, I find the best therapy is to lie down and concentrate on my breathing for twenty minutes. I suppose I should be thinking OM all the while, but it's astonishing how everything loosens up and the shivers go away. After the visit of a Lesbian acquaintance, rather far out, and an interview I think I'll suppress, it all came on in three days of shivering until I realized, with wonder, that I was terrified. No feeling of fear, but unmistakable.

Hormones have been checked. I assume they are normal, since the doctor has left me alone, but am calling him tomorrow. He assures me the temperature changes aren't big enough to be clinically anything (I measured them for three solid months).

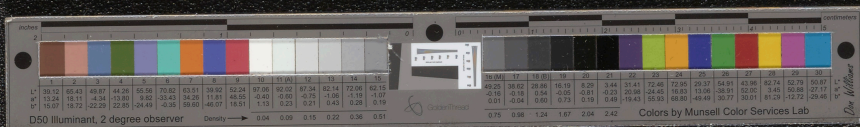
The trouble is, when I associate with Lesbians, I start getting attracted to everybody. And having wistful thoughts about Rudolph Valentino [this is a confession you must mention to nobody, not Valentino anyway], Cary Grant, &c.--rather odd list--and thinking if only one could tie you fellows down and tape your mouths.... Oh well. That would be dull, as well as inhumane. It isn't really preferring women in any erotic sense, because I'm damned if I know what purely erotic anything is; it is only the good sense to keep my hands out of the ore-crusher. The ones who want mothering were indeed the only-bearable ones, but they are exasperating in the end.

The only real cure is probably a community of friends who will give the support and maybe the cuddling. Binghamton is really the armpit of the universe (as Marilyn Hacker says somebody said about Wolverhampton).

Just finished that article on the Sex War in S.F.--and really, really, really, the totally revolting material I had to end up reading! I won't tell you the whole thing but will send you a copy when it comes out. It's for a publication called Women and Culture.

I think I've got the Untermeyer anthology. Won it in high school for getting good grades or something. It's an enormous, navy-blue book, as I remember, with vast numbers of minor poets in it. No, I don't like Cummings. I love Brecht and am studying him, with a pony. Don't know German.

Up in Buffalo there was/were two students of Chip's, one young Dominican woman who looked bright and very tough and survival-oriented and one philosophy grad. student, impossibly brilliant, and hiding behind the fat & plain armor. What is so really dreadful in being female is that you can't win in female terms (because women are defined as losers) and you can't win in male terms (then you're not a real woman). She is going to face a world much like the one I went into at 22, and she's got either the disadvantages or the advantages of not being pretty. I realize now



that I was--and can't decide what difference it made, if any, because (as you must know) there is not a girl in a million who believes that she's good-looking. I have this grad. student friend who is very very beautiful in an unusual way and her account of her adolescence was of extreme terror at the thought. She told herself for years (she said) it was because of the way she dressed, and then ~~x~~ went to school in blue jeans and came home profoundly upset because the boys still made passes at her. It's the feeling that it can't be turned off & it happens in some insane, automatic way every damned time you step out on the street (especially when you're thinking of something else) that drives us (not you) into gibbering. You must know all sorts of things about being a man that I don't, but I know that incredible feeling of being tied in automatically to all sorts of insane rules & regulations about your own body that have nothing to do with you and nothing to do with reproductive realities, either. That's what women mean when they say that our bodies don't belong to us. These sex war stories are dreadful (yours is a partial exception but only partial)--I don't mean they're all pulp because they're not, but the myth of the Sacred Penis is sending me screaming into the night. It's a terribly schizophrenogenic business, knowing that all one has to do is appear and one is cast helplessly in a psychodrama that doesn't make sense and is all written by somebody else and isn't to your benefit anyway. I do wish you'd write more about what it feels like to have to live up to Manliness and all that. About which I know nothing, from the inside. That goes on top of the craziness of being in a stupid world-- it's the icing on the cake.

You know, I do get along with women. Even ordinary women, I know so much now about what it's like for them and me and how much we have in common, despite our differences. But when you cross the differences of brains and talent with the differences of gender role (which should be smashed, killed, atomized, vaporized, liquidated, and exported to Jupiter) you get something I can't describe but tried to in FM. Because at some point, one just stops and says, "Wait a minute. This is crazy."

My medic isn't looking for anything in my gastro-intestinal tract; he just doesn't ~~x~~ know what to look for so he's checking everything. "I adore communicating with you--when I don't loathe it." Well, that's nice.

Have you ever read Ti-Grace Atkinson? Writing from some place on the far side of the moon. Very scary stuff.

Damn it, I don't want to be taken care of. I want brass knuckles.

Oh, you Penis People are impossible! (All right, you're an exception. Yes you are.) Of course I am down with a terrible case of shlock-fever from reading endless amounts of junk; there really is a difference between great writing and merely good writing, even, and I ought to go back to Dickens and especially Chaucer, wonderful Chaucer.

I did realize, reading "Mama Come Home", that Tillie starts getting friendly right after the hero's rape, but all the ~~xx~~ same I'm glad you wrote "The Women Men Don't See" (in which the women do go away with the aliens) afterwards. What's fascinating about the Sex War stories is the basic non-plot, that women are so dangerous and so powerful ~~x~~ that only God or nature or having a Sacred Penis or the loyalty and love of the women themselves can possibly protect the men. And what I want to know is, What are you--all so frightened of? Does it have anything to do with women? Is it really about other men? I just don't know. And you, being out of the battle lines, ought to be in this marvelous position to tell us all (men and women), just what is going on out there 'midst smoke and shell.



By the way, I read your reply to Suzy Charnas and if I haven't bravoed before, Bravo! Very good.

Really, the poisoning of bad literature. I read Regiment of Women. I read War Against the Yukks. I read When Women Rule (Sam Moskowitz, ed.) I read Ecce Femina. I read some other things. I read Herodotus and was immensely and pleasantly surprised.

My beautiful, impressive, and awesome friend, Mary (who seems to keep young men stashed about her house as living-room furniture; I don't know how she manages) gave me Grettir's Saga, which is a fine book.

There is some completeness and beauty in first-rate writing which arrests one quite independently of ~~the~~ the obvious message, let alone the hidden assumptions. Sometimes the writing actually breaks through the assumptions. "Summer and Smoke" was on TV and aside from a few sticky moments with minor characters or when Laurence Harvey's accent wore thin, it was very good. And somehow there is a difference, though I can't really tell what it is. As if adhering perfectly to the medium does break through to some truth, however imperfect, beyond the artist's direct capacity.

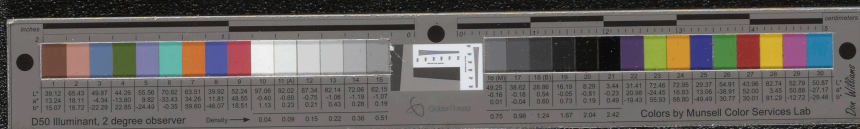
By the way, there is a Donald Barthelme story in this week's NYer magazine ~~about~~ about fathers called "Manual for Sons" which is extremely funny and very, very moving. And the first thing I've ever read about fathers and sons that I understood from beginning to end. Do look it up if you can. You know ~~him~~ his crazy prose--well, this one is more like Carol Emshwiller than the usual Barthelme. It would be great to put together his piece and Emshwiller's story about J.S. Bach (something something Premonitions of Anxiety?). Father as seen by son. Father as seen by daughter. &c. It is total nonsense and absolutely intelligible. Something in Canada called "the actual story of billy the kid" only 5 pp. long and no caps. Small male voices being heard across the land.

Every second woman I meet is writing poetry or painting or doing sculpture or learning computer technology (aha! librarians will rule the world).

You take care of yourself, too.

Joanna

P.S. Now you see why feminists go around karate-chopping men whenever possible--it's usually the only way to get their attention. One has to do shocking and disruptive things to break through that psychodrama-written-by-others or everything one does will be interpreted as being part of it. As Marilyn says about London, people get drunk and actually talk to one another and then everybody apologizes the next day and things go on being rotten. But you really can't ignore a woman who is systematically dismantling the coffee table and bashing you over the head with the pieces. Ignoring is the one reaction you can't have.



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