



Forbidden love

The moment it happened was an October Saturday, autumn in Central Texas too subtle for those raised in four seasons to appreciate, but the sky is so blue and the breeze so fresh and the smell of cedars so rich you can't believe you'll ever want to live anywhere else. The University of Texas, where I was a freshman, was playing Arkansas, a nationally-televised and hugely important arch rivalry. Those of us who couldn't drive to Little Rock for the game had popcorn and Oreos and a six pack or two of Lone Star on hand—the drinking age was 18 then and you could, as I recall, have alcohol in the dorms—and our RA had connected her TV in the lounge at the end of the hallway.

I lived in room 111 Kinsolving, first door off the lobby on the communal bath side, 50 yards from the TV and the crowd. My roommate Leslie had gone to the game with her sorority. We each had a desk, a bed that you pulled out from the wall about a foot to sleep on and shoved in during the day so it seemed like a sofa, and one side of a closet. I had a paper due on *Huckleberry Finn* the next

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week and was determined to get a start on it before the game. It was my first semester in college, and the paper was assigned for a class called The American Experience, a nine credit course with 732 students enrolled (almost exactly the number of students in the high school I'd graduated from a few months earlier), three professors, and probably 20 TA's who led discussion sections. The course combined English, Government, and History classes into one big, interdependent survey of the 20th century. I loved everything about that class, starting with the cavernous room full of unfamiliar faces. For a teacher's kid from a small town, anonymity was a sparkling dose of utter freedom. The professors were among the best I ever had, smart and engaging and witty, and that class was *hard*. None of the busy work that constituted most of my high school experience, a hundred pages or more to read every week. This paper was supposed to talk about imagery or symbolism or metaphor or something like that, and as I started to outline it I had little sense of how to get anything out of *Huckleberry Finn* apart from the child abuse and the swearing.

This was long before I could compose on a keyboard, so I was writing the paper in longhand, knowing I'd need to leave time to type it on the typewriter I got for graduation. (Typing here on my laptop it seems almost impossible I ever wrote anything that way, and my writing hand hurts just thinking about it.) I had *Huck* in front of me, class notes about literary devices, an assignment sheet. Bleah. An hour till game time. I promised myself a Lone Star beer if I could just get through a thesis sentence, and sighed deeply at the injustice of being inside on such a beautiful day, in my room instead of down the hall where the first round of popcorn was already disappearing from the bowl.

The Mississippi River is often discussed as a character in that and other Mark Twain works, so whatever I wrote that day (30 years later all I can retrieve is that it was about the river) was hardly the most original word on the topic. Something shimmered that morning, though, something that wasn't Central Texas crystal clear air scented with cedars or a pile of women laughing around a TV or

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burnt-orange hats and Cadillacs. It wasn't even the gleaming trombones waving precisely up and down through "Texas Fight," a sight and sound that to this day brings me to my emotional knees. It was seeing something in a story that wasn't there the first time I read it. I was an avid reader, almost always novels, that before that day had only been stories to me—good ones, mediocre ones, all of them precious to some degree just because they were stories.

This time, though, the story had a character that *wasn't a person*. Figuring that out, wrapping my mind around this weird and somehow completely sensible idea, was a transformational moment. The crystal blue day disappeared, the voices and laughter and music that had been pulling me down the hall became a distant murmur, there was nothing but me and *Huck* and a pencil and some loose-leaf lined paper. I could feel my heart beating hard, my eyes focusing so intently on the page they seemed locked into place. Some part of me stood aside and pointed at the person hunched over the desk and snickered: Look at what a NERD she is, stoned on an idea, a series of thoughts, a string of words.

Being stoned was a state I was more than familiar with, there in 1970s Austin, and this was delightfully like the best of those times. *Zooming* is how it feels, when your mind and your body melt together, though you didn't notice until then they were separate, and noticing that you DID think they were separate becomes an absorbing thought all on its own. You can feel very smart when you're stoned. Sitting there in my dorm room that day I'm sure I didn't feel smart; the territory was too unfamiliar, I was deeply uncertain that anything I was saying actually made any sense. But I couldn't take my eyes off the page my hand was moving across, except to grab up *Huckleberry Finn* and gulp down page after page, looking for pieces related to the picture I was drawing.

When the girls yelled down the hall that the game was starting, I all but groaned. Couldn't it wait till I ran out of this very heady and unexpected steam? I trudged down to sing "The Eyes of Texas" and the fight song and watched the kickoff, my hand itchy to have the

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pencil in it again. A sentence started to form in my mind—a better way to phrase the thesis statement, a third item for the preview—

“I’ll be right back.” I meant to just write down that sentence and come back to watching the game. I had more than earned that Lone Star and had all of the next afternoon blocked out to finish writing the paper. I sat down, scratched out a few words, wrote in the ones that had cut through the hazy inattention at the end of the hallway.

That’s when it happened, and I could not have been more stunned if the Virgin Mary had appeared sitting on a lawn chair outside my window: I was much more interested in writing my paper on *Huck Finn* than I was in watching *Texas play Arkansas*. Imagine that a man goes to his closet to pick out a tie and realizes he’s a woman; imagine a horse looks into her trough and realizes she is a swan. The idea that an intellectual task could be more appealing than the orgy of identity that is a college football game was exactly that strange and impossible to me, but somehow it was happening.

The murmur from down the hall grew to a roar when Texas scored to tie the game (it had been very quiet while Arkansas was in the lead). I tossed the pencil aside but literally caressed the page I was writing, and ran down to see the instant replay.

“Tina,¹ what are you *doing* down there?” My hallmates were dumbfounded to notice I’d been gone almost the entire first half. “Damned paper I have to write,” I said and didn’t look at them. It was very weird to be working during the football game, somehow shameful. I was not ready to be weird, or shamed.

Five minutes later I was back at my desk, looking up a word in the thesaurus. I cared about sentences in a brand new way: For the first time, they were carrying precious cargo. I heard the fight song as the half ended, the buzz of excited voices. I got up and all but tiptoed to the door, and very softly, surreptitiously, as though I were about to shoot up heroin or have sex, locked it shut.

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