



NORA EPHRON

[WRITER, DIRECTOR, PRODUCER]

“IT TAKES THIS HUGE AMOUNT OF WILL AND ENERGY
FOR ANYTHING TO HAPPEN TO YOU.”

Elements shared by screenwriting and journalism:

A beginning

A middle

An end

Nora Ephron says that when she's writing a movie, the middle is the hardest part to get right. But in real life, and socially, she's great at the middle. She'll even substitute it for the beginning, which has the captivating effect of fostering an immediate sense of social intimacy.

We met on a day when the leaves were starting to crumble off L.A.'s deciduous trees and blow all over the place. As she pulled open the heavy wooden door to her bright, neat home in Beverly Hills, before extending her hand or saying hello, she looked past me at the ground and said something about how she was happy there were no leaves on the front steps, that she didn't want it to be messy for my arrival. A little later, after giving me coffee and water to drink, and corn chips to eat, she motioned to a small bowl of satsuma tangerines on the table. She was already eating one and said, “You have to try one. They're

from my little tree.” Before I could pick one out of the bowl, she peeled off two segments from hers and placed them in my palm.

There's a practicality to her charisma that is rare, though that shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone who has followed her enormous career. Ephron has been working in male-dominated milieus since her early twenties: starting with newspaper journalism in New York in the 1960s; moving on to magazine writing, then screenplays; accruing a hat trick of Academy Award nominations for writing *Silkwood*, *When Harry Met Sally...*, and *Sleepless in Seattle*, which she also directed. Her latest success was *Julie & Julia*, which she wrote, produced, and directed.

Her 2006 book, *I Feel Bad About My Neck: And Other Thoughts on Being a Woman*, became a best seller, as did her follow-up essay collection, *I Remember Nothing: And Other Reflections*. Critics and fans recognize her as the mother of the romantic comedy, and a whole other subset of crit-

ics and fans credits her with being the original Tina Fey. But she's likely to reject all that lionizing—of her career, her accolades, her voice. It became clear over the course of our conversation that every bit of her work energy goes not into mythology, nor the crusade of the female comedy writer, but into the slog of writing, thinking, planning, and more writing. —Kathryn Borel

I. GRAMMATICALLY INCORRECT MORAL OUTRAGE

THE BELIEVER: You've said that as you get further into your career, you become afraid of repeating yourself, of repeating narratives. What exercises do you undertake to keep your brain churning out fresh material?

NORA EPHRON: One exercise is to write. That's one of the reasons I became interested in blogging—it was a new muscle to flex. I mean, I'm not even sure it is any longer, because things move very quickly in internet culture, but six years ago it was a new form. It wasn't quite an essay, but it was essayish. It had to be short because of the concentration span of the reader. It had a different function from other kinds of writing, in that it wasn't meant to just be this piece of writing that people read, it was meant to be a piece of writing that started a conversation among the readers. Which became a reason for people to read it, so that they could then express what they thought about it. And once you learn that about blogging, then you first of all have the sense not to read any of the comments—because at a certain point they will be mean about you.

BLVR: Right. And they'll always invoke Hitler at some point, according to Godwin's law of Nazi Analogies.

NE: Yeah! Or totally miss the joke. That's a given.

BLVR: The internet is the superhighway of grammatically incorrect moral outrage.

NE: The thing is, you don't really have to believe what you write in a blog for more than the moment when you're writing it. You don't bring the same solemnity that you would bring to an actual essay. You don't think, Is this

what I *really* want to say? You think, This is what I feel like saying at *this* moment. So that's one way to stay fresh. But there's no question in my mind... I sometimes feel like I don't have a thought that I haven't already written at some point in my life. [Pause] I don't mean that exactly. I honestly do have an original idea now and then. But there is a kind of sense of: If I were writing a column once a week, oh my god, I'd shoot myself! But the people who *do* do it are my writing heroes. I just can't get over how hard that is. People like Maureen Dowd and Gail Collins... My jaw is on the floor thinking of what it would be like to have to think of that many ideas. When I was at *Esquire* I did a monthly column, and that was about as many ideas as I had a year. About twelve ideas. There's no question that writing for a monthly is different than writing for a weekly. That's just the truth.

You know, the older I get, the more I understand what [Marshall] McLuhan meant when he said, "The medium is the message." I didn't really get it at all when I first read it, and now I'm very conscious of it. For instance, when I read a book on a Kindle, I've noticed that I'm more impatient. Because I'm turning the page so often, if something hasn't happened, I think, When is anything going to *happen* in this book? You become way more obsessed with plot than you would if you had an actual book and you understood where you were in that book. That little percentage tracker on the bottom of the Kindle screen is not a helpful thing. You can't go back when you've forgotten who a character is. So I'm very conscious of how that medium changes the reading experience completely.

II. FINDING VOICES

BLVR: What do you think of Arthur Quiller-Couch's "seven basic plots" theory? Or André Bazin's quote about how a great painter makes the same painting his entire life? Or that Woody Allen has made the same movie umpteen times?

NE: I think if you're lucky enough to find a voice in whatever you do, that voice will come sneaking out no matter what. So I certainly think that's true. But I don't think for one second that Woody Allen has made the same movie over and over again.

BLVR: Having spent the last while reading most of your essays and watching your movies, I came to the conclusion that your two greatest skills are that you elevate the minute to make it interesting, and you ground the tragic to make it relatable. I feel like those are the hallmarks of your voice.

NE: [Laughs] Thank you. I'm happy to hear this.

BLVR: Do you think you were born with that voice?

NE: No. I think, for instance, that Joan Didion found her voice very early. She may have been born with her voice. When she was very young and writing at *Vogue*, you could look at a paragraph and say, "No one else could have written this but her." I don't think I came anywhere near that. And, by the way, I don't think anyone ever looks at my stuff and says, "No one could've written that but her!" I did not feel comfortable with a "voice" until I had been a journalist for seven or eight years.

BLVR: Was there a particular piece that caused you to think, This is it; I've really hit on something?

NE: When I was at the *New York Post*, I covered the things you cover at the *New York Post*: trials and murders and the wedding of Luci Baines Johnson. I did everything. And then at a certain point they wanted to offer me a column. That was a huge deal; I was about twenty-four. And I spent about three weeks trying to write something, and I couldn't do it. It was a total failure! I just said to them, "I don't know how to do this. I'm not good at this."

BLVR: Why not?

NE: I don't think I was "me" yet. I think I was still floundering around in all sorts of ways. I really did not know how to do it. I was at the *Post* for five years, then I was a freelance writer, and then when *Esquire* offered me a column, when I was thirtyish, I was ready. I've always felt that one of the mistakes people make is that they try to do something that is just slightly beyond their skill set, and then feel they've failed. When the *Post* hired me, I was twenty-two. They knew I had never been a newspaper reporter. They started me slow, with three-hundred-word

pieces. Then I did slightly longer pieces, and I'd been there a year before I got to do what they called a "page piece," which was about twelve hundred words.

BLVR: Slowly for you, maybe, but you were still in New York City. It's not as though you started in Muncie, Indiana.

NE: Well, I knew enough not to go get a job as a reporter at some little newspaper outside of New York and hope that someone would knock on my door one day...

BLVR: And present you with a job at the *New York Times*, tied up in a bow.

NE: I just inched my way forward, and by the time I left the *Post* I was absolutely shot. I couldn't write one more piece of that sort. So when I started writing movies, which was in '75 or '76, I was ready to do that. It was fun to go into something I really knew nothing about.

BLVR: And to be writing fiction all of a sudden...

NE: Yes, absolutely! The only way to learn is to keep doing something new, and, if you're lucky, learning with people who really know how to do it. People who will say, "No, no, no! Let's turn this scene over," or "Let's try this, let's do that, let's talk about breakups so we can make this breakup better." You know, all this stuff I learned from Mike Nichols.

BLVR: Screenwriting is very specific in terms of its structure. Journalistic work is slightly looser. Did you have any difficulties adapting to that more-rigid format?

NE: The fundamental thing that's true of both is that there's a beginning, a middle, and an end. What I really understood as a magazine writer was when the beginning had to start to end, and the middle had to begin, and when the middle had to start to end and when the ending had to begin. And if you know that, you're halfway to being a screenwriter. People who go to those seminars with—

BLVR: Robert McKee—

NE: And they know there are, let's say, seventy-six "master scenes"... I don't even know if a "master scene" is an expression! But it's all broken down mathematically, and I don't understand any of that.

BLVR: Really?

NE: I don't do it. I never have done it. All that stuff that you learn about act structure, and scene structure, that every scene has three acts, all that stuff... I knew very instinctively from magazine writing.

BLVR: And by the time you had left the *Post* and were writing for magazines, you were no longer "floundering," as you said earlier. You had found your voice.

NE: Sure—and all that material that ended up in *Wallflower at the Orgy*. But the great thing about the *Post* was that—unlike the *New York Times*—in that period you were allowed to be whatever you were. You weren't allowed to be right-wing, that was certainly true, but you were allowed to be a sort of left-wing nut or a sort of funny person. I remember covering those Johnson girl weddings with at least 150 other people, most of them women, and they were basically writing about how many raisins were in the fruitcake. I was the only one who would write it as this hilarious cultural event instead of taking it completely seriously. I had an editor there named Stan Opotowsky, and he was always coming up with these great ideas for me. He would say, "Go out and find the most expensive apartment for rent in New York and report on it!" And I thought, Oh I'm going to do this forever! I'm never going to want to do anything but this! [Laughs]

III. HAPPY ENDINGS, UNHAPPY MIDDLES

BLVR: Have you ever had a project that felt impossible to finish?

NE: Yes. Oh, definitely. Several screenplays. God yes.

BLVR: Is there a part of the screenplay that you find the most difficult?

NE: The middle!

BLVR: Because that's when all the stuff has to happen?

NE: The middle is the hard part, yes. The beginning and the end are the easy parts.

BLVR: I was expecting you to say endings, for some reason. I feel like it's tricky to draw out an ending, to resist the temptation not to cram all the solutions into the last ten minutes.

NE: I can never make my endings very long. When we were doing *When Harry Met Sally...* the ending was about seven pages.

BLVR: Are you an advocate of happy endings?

NE: I don't mean to get boring here, but I have written things that don't have happy endings. My closet is full of sad little scripts that didn't get made that have sad endings. It's very hard to get a movie made these days that has a sad ending. Or to get a sad movie made. [Laughs] It's very hard to get a movie made.

BLVR: Were you ever robbed of your ability to write because of overwhelmingly sad moments?

NE: No. I've had friends who occasionally call and say, "I'm blocked!" And I've said, "Well, how are you going to pay the rent?" To me it was so obvious, you just had to work through it. In the old days, I would just type the piece over and over in the hopes that it would somehow push me into the next sentence. But you don't do that anymore with computers.

BLVR: Do you have little exercises you do these days when it's not coming as easily as you want it to?

NE: I think one thing that you do is just make notes. You have to sit in a period called "not-writing" and write pages and pages of anything that crosses your mind. Or you can read things that will help you. I just did a script that has *Pride and Prejudice* as one of its themes...

BLVR: *Lost in Austen*.

NE: Right. And I read the book a zillion times, and I did a kind of outline of the book, and in the end I used absolutely none of it except maybe the first six chapters. But the point is you do *something*, whether or not it's the actual writing. When I work with my sister Delia, we outline everything we're doing. Completely. The outlines are endless, at least fifty pages long. But when I write by myself, I almost never have an outline; I just do it. I know the structure. I know the beginning, the middle, the end.

BLVR: Do you do that with Delia so that there are no arguments during the process?

NE: Yes.

BLVR: When did you learn that you have to do that when you're writing with her?

NE: I did it with Alice Arlen first, on *Silkwood*. Collaboration is a tricky thing. There's always a negotiating point in collaboration. But when you're basing it on something else, on real-life events, there are givens. Karen Silkwood worked here, died here, had a boyfriend who she broke up with, had a roommate... All that stuff was a given, so

**SPECIFICATIONS MADE REGARDING
FOOD BY SALLY ALBRIGHT
IN *WHEN HARRY MET SALLY*...**

- ★ *Oil and vinegar on the side*
- ★ *Pie heated*
- ★ *Ice cream on the side*
- ★ *Strawberry ice cream instead of vanilla*
- ★ *If no strawberry, no ice cream at all, just whipped cream*
- ★ *No whipped cream if it's from a can, only fresh*
- ★ *If no ice cream or no real whipped cream, do not heat pie*
- ★ *Fill the juice up three-quarters of the way*
- ★ *Just a splash of Bloody Mary mix*
- ★ *With a little piece of lime*
- ★ *Lime on the side*
- ★ *Chocolate sauce on the side*

—list compiled by Emily Myers

Alice and I couldn't argue about it. But I could never have written *When Harry Met Sally*... with anyone else.

BLVR: Because it was all already in your head?

NE: Yeah. I mean, it wasn't based on anything.

BLVR: Do you ever apply a screenplay structure to your own life? Has a part of your life reminded you of act three?

NE: No. But I definitely divide my life into decades. Almost every ten years, something in my work life has changed. My twenties were my journalistic phase, then there was my screenwriting phase, then I became a director, then I started doing some plays...

BLVR: You have a strange amount of pioneering, ambitious women in your family. Your sisters are successful writers, your mother was one of the few working female screenwriters in Hollywood at the time, and your mother's aunt was the first female dentist ever?

NE: Allegedly!

BLVR: Do you think your ambition was innate or imparted?

NE: I don't know. Part of it was that in my house, unlike 99.9 percent of all women our age, we were basically instructed to go out and have careers. Especially if you have a mother who's as powerful as ours was—and as simultaneously withholding—or powerful on account of that, who knows which... But part of your ambition comes from a desire to please her. Long after she is on the planet, by the way. So that's part of it. But there's no question I really wanted to be a newspaper reporter. And I really wanted to get a movie made. And I really wanted to direct a movie. If you don't want something, it's hard—in the movie business, especially. Sometimes I speak at film schools, and I speak to rooms of women. And they're very, very nice women, but you can see that they don't understand that it takes this huge amount of will and energy for anything to happen to you.

BLVR: Have you noticed an evolution of how your ambition has been received? In the 1970s versus the '80s or '90s? I wonder if it was more punishing to be an ambitious woman in the 1970s, even though there are still myriad ways in which ambitious women are punished.

NE: Do you think it's ambitious women or successful women? I think you're very safe as an ambitious woman if you haven't succeeded.

BLVR: Then let's change the term to *successful women*.

NE: I think there's no question that women are jealous of other women, and men of course have their own problems with women. It's a weird thing because it's a fact, and yet you have to behave as if it's not a fact. Here's the given: It's really hard for women. People are going to attack you in a way that feels more virulent than it does with men. And you have to know what you're in it for, which is that you want to do your work, and you want to do as good a job as you can, and you want to do it again and again.

BLVR: So you've never fought back against it overtly?

NE: No. To me, living well is the best revenge. You just have to keep writing things and doing what you do. For all of the women who direct, we're always finding ourselves in situations in which people want to take pictures of "women directors." We're always feeling like we're put into a category that is sort of on the side...

BLVR: Like you're not real directors—

NE: Exactly. And what all directors do is *exactly* the same thing. You work incredibly long days, you're under unbelievable pressure, you run a movie, which is essentially a small company, for a year at the very minimum. You toss and turn, you take Ambien, you are all the same person. Yet there's this moment when you are suddenly pigeonholed and interviewed every March by some very talented reporter who has just gotten the new statistics that only 13 percent of movies were made by women this year, and how is it possible, and blah blah blah... And what you're meant to do in those interviews is complain

about how difficult it is. So I don't really like to do those interviews, because to me it's just like, "Write the next movie and try and get it made."

It's always a shock to the people who run studios when a movie that is for women is a hit. They have an infinite capacity to be shocked. Though I *did* feel that *Bridesmaids* was some kind of fantastic moment. Aside from the fact that it was just a hilarious movie, it was great if you wanted to be political for just a second. It was better than all those movies made by men. It was a huge monster hit, and no huge movie stars were in it. People *became* stars from having been in it. I was there opening day at 10:30 in the morning, and I knew it was going to have a monster weekend. But the studio didn't know that. Then that was followed by *The Help*. That was another movie where everyone said, "Who's going to see that?"

BLVR: Do you think *Bridesmaids* will have a repercussive effect on the industry?

NE: It will probably be one-eighth of one degree easier for the next person. But the other great thing about *Bridesmaids* is if anyone still believes that women aren't funny, this has been the year when you simply would be hooted out of almost any room for saying that. *Bridesmaids* was like breaking the sound barrier. It was like, "OK, that's that."

IV. SALLY IN HER SIXTIES

BLVR: When you were making *Julie & Julia*, was there a part of you that related to Julia Child, another pioneering woman in a field dominated by men?

NE: When I learned to cook and was first exposed to her at the beginning of her career, I don't think in any way I thought, Oh, she and I are similar, but I was interested to realize that her cookbook wasn't published until she was fifty. And I didn't start directing until I was fifty. So that was a way I really felt very connected to her. I certainly felt very connected to that marriage.

BLVR: Because of your marriage to your husband, Nick?

NE: Yes, because I'm so lucky to be with somebody who

thinks what I do is great. My sister Delia and I adapted this book for the stage called *Love, Loss, and What I Wore*. There's a part in it that's basically Delia's story of the end of her first marriage. She and her husband were fighting because he didn't want her to write anymore. She had cowritten one book at the time, which was called *The Adventurous Crocheter*. And she sat there during this horrible argument, saying the first sentence of the book over and over in her head: "There is no wrong way to crochet, there are good ways and bad ways but there is no wrong way to crochet..." That part really rings a bell for me. When I was in my twenties, I think men had way more serious problems with women working. This was before the women's movement, and that husband of hers was just so threatened by her. And you can barely call that book a success. It's not as though *The Adventurous Crocheter* was a best seller! He was just threatened because she had done *something*.

BLVR: Nick is a screenwriter, too—do you two use each other as resources when you're writing? Do you ask Nick for notes; does he ask you for notes?

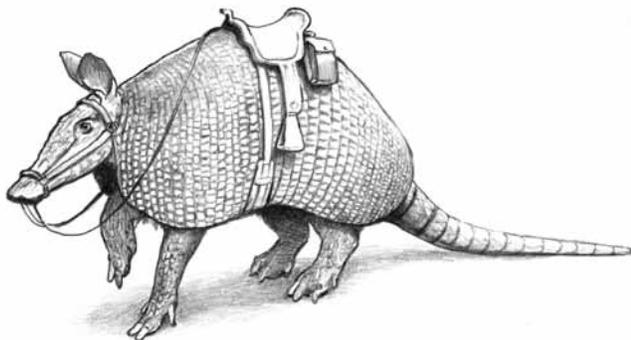
NE: He doesn't ask me too much, but I'm constantly badgering him to listen to something or read something.

BLVR: Is he good at giving notes?

NE: He's very good, but he's very nice.

BLVR: What do you think Sally would be like if she was sixty-five?

NE: [Long pause] Who knows!



BLVR: Do you ever think of the fate of your characters?

NE: Never! Why would you do that? One of the great things about movies is that it's just that short period of time. It's a bubble. The last thing you want to know is that Elizabeth and Darcy had a fight over how to treat the servants!

V. THE MIDAS TOUCH OF COMEDY

BLVR: You've written about hard moments in your life that might have caused another person to hide in bed, or camp out in their therapist's office. How highly do you value that capacity for morphing pain into story?

NE: I think that skill is a good, healthy thing to have. I think my parents taught me and my sisters a truly life-saving technique. "Someday this will be a story!" is a strange thing to say to your weeping child, and it's counter-intuitive to me now that I'm a mother, but that's what my parents would say to all of us. [Pause] Sometimes I think, Well, we are all really good at it because we're just wildly shallow people. Thank god we learned to do this, because we have no—

BLVR: Soul?

NE: Yes. You said that.

BLVR: Oh god. I finished your sentence all wrong.

NE: No, it's good! The point is that's who we all are. I don't mean that all four of us are the same person, but we did all get this thing from our parents. And I don't think it was genetic, even though I think almost everything is. You know when they do those studies on identical twins who have been adopted into different families, and then years later you find out that even though they've never met, they both drive a Camaro? Something I've always wondered is if it's the same with sense of humor. I wish they'd do a test on that.

BLVR: Not only do you have a history of making the difficult moments of your life into very funny creative pieces, but also they've turned into some extreme career triumphs

for you. *Heartburn*, which was about the dissolution of your marriage, was a wild success, for example. When you were writing it, did you think, I will be vindicated?

NE: No. [Pause] I'm going to say something that is not an answer to your question, but it is something I think about. When I did this play called *Imaginary Friends*, about Lillian Hellman and Mary McCarthy, I was very interested to realize that they had both burst out of the crowd by writing things that were shocking. Lillian Hellman wrote *The Children's Hour*, which was about lesbianism. This was in 1930—something and *nobody* ever talked about that. Mary McCarthy wrote something called “The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt,” which was about having casual sex on a train. That was another thing that nobody wrote about. I realized you could look at the careers of many women writers and see that moment where they did “the shocking thing.” If you look at Gloria Steinem and the Playboy Bunny piece, or Joan Didion, who wrote about Hawaii and trying to decide whether to get a divorce or not... I could go on and on.

That moment, for me, was not *Heartburn*. It was a piece I wrote in *Esquire* called “A Few Words about Breasts.” I knew when I finished writing that piece that either it was going to be a huge success or be judged as a kind of “Who needs to know any of this?” kind of thing. One or the other was going to happen, but I absolutely knew that both were possible. By the time I did *Heartburn*, I was around forty. I had a very clear memory of being at my typewriter in Bridgehampton, where Carl [Bernstein] and I had had a house—that was now in the divorce—but we were still using it at alternate times. I was supposed to be writing a screenplay. And when I started writing, sixteen pages of that novel came out in two days. I thought, Oh, I've found it. The whole time the marriage was breaking up and I was in a state of complete torment and misery, I knew that this would someday be a funny story. I absolutely knew it. It was too horrible. It was too ridiculous not to be.

BLVR: Too horrible to not be interesting.

NE: Yes. You know, even at the time, I was able to not be too horribly victimish about the whole thing. I just

don't have that thing. I'm really opposed to it. And I have friends who, four or five years after a divorce, are still complaining about it, or still in court, or still tied in crazy ways to the experience of the end of their marriage. I just have no patience for it at all. I feel terrible for them, but I am very impatient about it. It's like “Move on, get over it, this is it.” You know?

BLVR: There's that great Nietzsche quote: “A joke is an epitaph on the death of a feeling.” Making a joke is a good way of removing poison from a moment.

NE: Sure, but it's not the only way. If you look at *The Year of Magical Thinking*, for example, that is *absolutely not* turning a tragic event into anything at all amusing, but instead just turning it into something good.

BLVR: Do you ever find yourself unable to truly feel a moment because you're busy thinking. This will be a story?

NE: Not when things are really bad.

BLVR: But when things are on the verge?

NE: Yes, absolutely. When Carl and I were in the middle of breaking up and we were still together, and he had fallen in love with the wife of the British ambassador, her husband—who was a very, very important political human being—called me. He said, “I think we should get together.” And so I said, “Yes. We must.” And I asked him where should we get together, and he said, “Someplace out of the way.” And I said, “But we're not having the affair! They are!” Anyway, we settled on a Chinese restaurant on Connecticut Avenue. And when we met in front of the restaurant, we fell into each other's arms, weeping. I was pregnant, and it was so horrible, and I said, “Oh, Peter, isn't it awful?” He said, “Yes, it's just awful... What's happening to *this country*?” And you know, I didn't stop crying, but I thought, Oh, that is hilarious. I knew someday I could use that. And it's in *Heartburn*! The point is: It doesn't mean I wasn't a complete basket case, but if you are a writer that is what you do. That's what your life is for, to feed the animal.

BLVR: Does it make you greedy for those moments, do you think?

NE: I think it makes some people greedy for those moments. Tom Wolfe once said this really brilliant thing. This was about thirty years ago. He was giving a speech about reporting, and how important it is for a writer to keep reporting, and to be able to get outside their self. He said that “some fiction writers”—and he was clearly referring to Philip Roth—are like Charles Lamb’s essay on a roast pig, which is that they think they have to burn the house

down to cook the pig. What he was talking about was Philip Roth going through one woman after another, and writing one book after another about them. You cannot in any way—thirty years later—say that Tom Wolfe was right about Philip Roth, because his body of work is just too fantastic. But he is someone who, if he gets cancer, he puts it in the next book. I think for some people it’s a very short distance between it happening and it becoming a book. I think some people probably create a certain amount of uproar in their lives in order to have the next thing to write about. But I don’t think I ever did that. ★

Sedaratives, continued from page 31

Dear Lance,

I have a friend named Lance and recently saw a great masseuse named Lance, but I still can’t get over my weird, complicated feelings about the name Lance. There’s nothing wrong with your vocabulary, Lance, but your name... It’s so “slick,” as my grandma would say. I don’t believe you have tender feelings. You’re just a caddish high-school athlete who can feign emotion only if it means you’ll get sex, right?

Be well!

Lena

Dear Sedaratives,

I really like lesbians (as a people, not as a sexual preference). I find that they are jovial and caring. But they also aren’t really fond of me. Is there a way I can make myself more accessible to lesbians so that I can have more in my social circle?

“Kurt” Richter

Mesa, Ariz.

Dear “Kurt,”

This is the only question in this batch that I feel truly qualified to answer. I know a lot of lesbians and am even related to one, and I’ve also been told that my butt has a sort of lesbian quality that the rest of me doesn’t have. (Is that offensive? I’m treading carefully because, unlike you, lesbians like me a lot and I want to keep it that way.) I think in general it’s good to seek people out based on their individual merits, and not to try to fill a lesbian quota. Life isn’t Reading Rainbow—we don’t get one of each kind of mi-

nority friend, and we can’t reduce lesbians to qualities like “jovial” or “caring” or “square-butted.” Lesbians are a hugely diverse populace, and to define them by useless stereotypes isn’t offensive just to them, it’s offensive to us all. By boxing people in with unifying characteristics based on their romantic preferences, you are a soldier of the hegemonic norm, and you’re violently sexualizing their love and their life. However, if you really want a lesbian to like you, I would arrive at her door with Indigo Girls tickets, a Home Depot gift certificate, and a box of gluten-free cake mix. Also, some Tevas and a tank top with thick straps so y’all can go hiking comfortably. I don’t know where you’d find her in Arizona, so head to San Fran or whatever town Smith College is in.

Let’s move in together after one date,

“Lena”

Dear Sedaratives,

My mother-in-law just returned from Germany. It was her first international experience. She did not care for it. She found the people rude, and they made her feel like she was stupid. Is there a tactful way to tell her that it was not the intention of the Germans to make her feel stupid?

Christopher H.

Archer, Iowa

Dear Christopher,

This is a hard one for me, because I just recently came back from Germany myself and I kinda did think that they were trying to make me feel stupid.

Agree to disagree,

Lena ★