

Sarah Schulman

Sarah Schulman is an incredibly prolific writer having published 17 books – both fiction and non-fiction, while also working as a playwright, an activist and an educator at the College of Staten Island. She will be our guest writer at the Literature Roundtable this year on March 7th, 2017 from 2:30 to 4:30 pm in the Atrium Amphitheatre (Atrium building, Ground Floor). The main focus of the Roundtable will be her most recent novel: *The Cosmopolitans*. *The Cosmopolitans* is a modern rewriting of Honoré de Balzac's *Cousin Bette* (1846) that is equally inspired by James Baldwin's *Another Country* (1962) and set in late 1950s New York City. Below is information about the author, and a selected reading list of a few of her more notable publications, with brief descriptions. In this packet, you will also find reviews of *The Cosmopolitans*, a recent interview with Sarah Schulman and selections from *The Cosmopolitans*, including the first two chapters, a later excerpt from a scene set in an advertising company in the early years of television (possibly interesting for faculty teaching PTW courses), and a "A Note on Style" from Schulman explaining the inspiration of the novel as well as her stylistic choices in creating the world of her novel.

About the Author

Sarah Schulman's love of New York is evident in *The Cosmopolitans*, her 10th novel and 17th book. Distinguished Professor of the Humanities at CUNY, her honors and awards include a Guggenheim in Playwriting and a Fulbright in Judaic Studies. A well known literary chronicler of the marginalized and subcultural, Sarah's fiction has focused on queer urban life for thirty years. Her nonfiction includes *The Gentrification of The Mind*, a memoir of the homogenization of her city in the wake of the AIDS crisis. Her plays and films have been seen at Playwrights Horizons, The Berlin Film Festival and The Museum of Modern Art. An AIDS historian, Sarah is co-founder of the ACT UP Oral History Project. She is on the advisory board of Jewish Voice for Peace and is faculty advisor to Students for Justice in Palestine at the College of Staten Island. (from The Feminist Press, publisher of *The Cosmopolitans*)

Selected Reading List

Fiction

The Cosmopolitans (New York: Feminist Press, 2016).

From the Feminist Press: A modern retelling of Balzac's classic *Cousin Bette* by one of America's most prolific and significant writers. Earl, a black, gay actor working in a meatpacking plant, and Bette, a white secretary, have lived next door to each other in the same Greenwich Village apartment building for thirty years. Shamed and disowned by their families, both found refuge in New York and in their domestic routine. Everything changes when Hortense, a wealthy young actress from Ohio, comes to the city to "make it."

People in Trouble (1990)

artist, still loves husband Peter and wants the two parts of her love life to somehow peacefully coexist. They won't--Peter feels jealous; Molly, neglected. The triangle is played out as AIDS kills hundreds; homelessness and hunger are as ubiquitous as Ronald Horne, a cold-blooded, homophobic real-estate mogul with political aspirations. At the end of their ropes, the AIDS activists who constitute the group Justice decide that they've got nothing to lose. Molly first, then Kate, become involved in Justice's inventive schemes of civil disobedience (*from Publisher's Weekly*).

***Girls, Visions and Everything* (1986)**

From *Publisher's Weekly*: Lila Futuransky is a lesbian living on the East Side of New York who admires Jack Kerouac and is determined to emulate her hero. She wanders around the city, takes many lovers, but then she meets Emily. They fall for each other, and soon Lila must choose between her love for Emily and her desire to continue living out her fantasy from *On the Road* (excerpted From *Publishers Weekly*).

Non-Fiction

Conflict is not Abuse: Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility, and the Duty of Repair (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2016)

From the Publisher: From intimate relationships to global politics, Sarah Schulman observes a continuum: that inflated accusations of harm are used to avoid accountability. Illuminating the difference between Conflict and Abuse, Schulman directly addresses our contemporary culture of scapegoating. This deep, brave, and bold work reveals how punishment replaces personal and collective self-criticism, and shows why difference is so often used to justify cruelty and shunning. Rooting the problem of escalation in negative group relationships, Schulman illuminates the ways in which cliques, communities, families, and religious, racial, and national groups bond through the refusal to change their self-concept. She illustrates how Supremacy behaviour and Traumatized behaviour resemble each other, through a shared inability to tolerate difference.

The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2012)

From the Publisher: In this gripping memoir of the AIDS years (1981–1996), Sarah Schulman recalls how much of the rebellious queer culture, cheap rents, and a vibrant downtown arts movement vanished almost overnight to be replaced by gay conservative spokespeople and mainstream consumerism. Schulman takes us back to her Lower East Side and brings it to life, filling these pages with vivid memories of her avant-garde queer friends and dramatically recreating the early years of the AIDS crisis as experienced by a political insider. Interweaving personal reminiscence with cogent analysis, Schulman details her experience as a witness to the loss of a generation's imagination and the consequences of that loss.

Stagestruck: Theater, AIDS, and the Marketing of Gay America (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998)

From the Publisher: In *Stagestruck* noted novelist and outspoken critic Sarah Schulman offers an account of her growing awareness of the startling similarities between her novel *People in*

Trouble and the smash Broadway hit *Rent*. Written with a powerful and personal voice, Schulman's book is part gossipy narrative, part behind-the-scenes glimpse into the New York theater culture, and part polemic on how mainstream artists co-opt the work of "marginal" artists to give an air of diversity and authenticity to their own work. Rising above the details of her own case, Schulman boldly uses her suspicions of copyright infringement as an opportunity to initiate a larger conversation on how AIDS and gay experience are being represented in American art and commerce

My American History: Lesbian and Gay Life During the Reagan/Bush Years (1994)

From the publisher: My American History documents the imagination and expectations of activists as they struggled, against impossible odds and growing opposition, to articulate a movement for freedom and dignity during the Reagan/Bush years. My American History also includes the Lesbian Avengers Handbook, written by Schulman and other members of the Lesbian Avengers, a direct action political group. The Handbook is both a practical guide to direct political action as well as a document of the new lesbian activism.

Two Reviews of *The Cosmopolitans* by Sarah Schulman

From *Publisher's Weekly*

With a plot and characters inspired by Balzac's *Cousin Bette*, the latest from novelist and nonfiction writer Schulman (*After Delores*) is intended in part as a feminist response to James Baldwin's *Another Country*. Like its realist forebears, the novel offers a rich evocation of its time and place—in this case, Greenwich Village in 1958. Earl, a gay, black aspiring actor, and Bette, a straight, white secretary at an ad agency, have been neighbors and best friends for years, creating a relationship out of shared loneliness (whether it's the result of their race, gender, or sexuality), one that for Bette, at least, seems fulfilling. But the unexpected arrival of Bette's vivacious young cousin Hortense offers Bette an unpleasant reminder of the scandalous past that caused her to flee her Midwestern upbringing decades earlier. Earl, who longs for a kind of love that Bette just can't provide, seizes an opportunity presented by Hortense, also an aspiring actor, setting in motion a series of betrayals that drive a wedge between Bette and him for the first time. Simultaneously a realist exploration of a particular milieu, an illustration of the changing roles and possibilities for women at that time, and a series of thoughtful musings on the nature of companionship and platonic love, Earl and Bette's story is also a satisfying revenge narrative and a portrait of an unexpected but vital friendship. *Agent: Mitchell Waters, Curtis Brown. (Mar.)*

From *The New York Times*

"New Yorkers have a special way of moving. They advance ever forward," says a character in Schulman's voluptuous novel of Greenwich Village in 1958, when you could catch Carmen McRae at Trude Heller's nightclub and buy a brownstone on 10th Street for \$30,000. Despite their longtime Village pedigree, however, the neighbors and soul mates Earl and Bette are stuck in place. Earl, a gay black actor consigned to working in a slaughterhouse, is hemmed in by the masquerades of the closet and the debasing roles available to performers of color. Bette, a white ad-agency secretary who, at 50, works for a ditsy young man, can't let go of the grievous treatment she suffered some 30 years earlier at the hands of her Ohio family and former beau.

Enter, with suitcase and copy of Stanislavsky, Bette's cousin Hortense, a would-be actress with a fire to rival Eugene O'Neill's barroom agitator Hickey. If this setup nods to O'Neill, Balzac and Henry James, its fringe-dwelling characters channel the lonely-hunter spirit of Carson McCullers (the subject of Schulman's 2002 biographical play). "The Cosmopolitans" is a book of sighs, for dreams thwarted and for a city that has long since moved on.

Excerpted from "Homages" by Jan Stuart

Sarah Schulman on her latest provocations

Chris Freeman

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I FIRST encountered Sarah Schulman in January 1996, when she was a speaker at "Literature in the Age of AIDS" in Key West. That seems a lifetime ago. We met again a couple of years later at UNC-Asheville, where she was beginning to articulate her ideas about "familial homophobia," the central idea in her remarkable book *Ties That Bind* (2009).

Schulman has spent her whole adult life as a journalist, novelist, playwright, and activist. This year, she has published two new books, a novel called *The Cosmopolitans*, which came out in the spring, and the powerful nonfiction book titled *Conflict is Not Abuse*, due out in October. Her integrity as an artist and a citizen makes her a singular presence in American culture.

What follows is excerpted from a much longer transcript, which can be found on the G&LR website at www.GLReview.org.

Chris Freeman: You've been an activist and a writer for 35 years. I first became aware of your early work with the 1994 publication of *My American History: Lesbian and Gay Life During the Reagan/Bush Years*.

Sarah Schulman: That's my first book of nonfiction, my journalism from before AIDS, through the epicenter of the crisis. It's about my transformation as I started to understand what was happening. I'm one of the few people who's been *writing* about AIDS from the beginning. It's an enduring relationship for me.

CF: How do you approach writing nonfiction? Is it different from fiction for you?

SS: I never write about an ongoing conversation. That is to say, every nonfiction book I write is to initiate a conversation. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. For example, *Ties That Bind* has not been as widely read as *Gentrification of the Mind*. I believe *Ties* should have been published by a mainstream publisher. When you are the first person to present an idea, it is not easy to get published.

CF: Your new book is another intervention in nonfiction, bringing together several issues you've been thinking and writing about for the past decade.

SS: It's called *Conflict Is Not Abuse: Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility, and the Duty of Repair*. It's about three realms where I feel that conflict is misrepresented as abuse, through the overstatement of harm: the interpersonal realm, the criminalization of HIV, and Israel/Palestine. I define conflict as "power struggle" and abuse as "power over." My thesis

is that when we deny our participation in creating conflict and instead claim that we are victims of abuse, the power of the state is enhanced. So with the criminalization of HIV, for instance, these laws encourage people to call the police on someone who didn't disclose their HIV status, regardless of their health, viral load, or whatever. For the past thirty years, the HIV-negative person has been seen as being responsible for that status and for maintaining it. With criminalization, the HIV-positive person becomes the "abuser," while the negative person is now the victim who has been criminally wronged. It is a state apparatus exploiting a new social trend of not taking personal responsibility for our role in situations of conflict. Or, to give a different example, New York City has 200,000 cases of domestic violence [per year], so when someone overreacts to conflict, claiming abuse when it is not abuse, they redirect resources away from those who need them most.

My final example is an analysis of the rhetoric surrounding the 2014 Israeli war on Gaza. Again, we see the externalization of interior anxiety, negative group loyalty, the refusal to face one's own role in creating conflict. All of these elements converge on the murder of over 2,000 people in Gaza. The same tropes that an individual uses to claim "abuse"--because they misunderstood something or were made uncomfortable by an email--become the tools of government propaganda. There is a direct relationship between the private refusal of accountability and the nationalistic projection. If we shun or bully the people we know because they say something or exhibit difference in a way that makes us uncomfortable, how will we be able to make peace, or welcome refugees, or win justice? These two actions are antithetical.

CF: You seem quite willing to engage in quite strenuous debate on these controversial issues.

SS: I talk to people constantly with whom I disagree about Israel, for example. I feel that it's my responsibility to do that. The occupation is being carried out in my name on two grounds: because I'm Jewish and American. When I talk to really extremist people on this issue, it becomes immediately clear that they are grossly uninformed. Usually they have never had real experiences with Palestinians and have not listened to what they have to say about their own experiences. In the U.S., this information is not passively acquired.

CF: Your new novel, *The Cosmopolitans*, is set in Greenwich Village in 1958. We follow a woman, Bette, who is fifty, from Ohio, and she has a kind of small life in New York. Her best friend and neighbor is Earl, a black, gay actor whose life is more dramatic than hers. Late in the book, we find out that they live in the building on 10th Street where you spent some years growing up. That's a fascinating crossing between fiction and autobiography.

SS: This is all very layered, as is the book. It took me thirteen years to write it. It's a look back at my urban origins, but also it's a portrait of pre-gentrification New York. I wanted to evoke the New York that was a refuge for people from uncomprehending backgrounds. The performance artist Penny Arcade has this joke about how we all left home and came to New York to get away from the most popular kids in school, and now, with gentrification, they've all moved to New York. It is the very people who couldn't survive in their small towns who made New York a center for the production of ideas for the world, the very people who are getting squeezed out now. The novel shows neighbors and relationships, what apartment living produced. Suburbanization privatized these human relations.

The literary look back is to Balzac's novel Cousin Bette, which I studied at the University of Chicago in a class on 19th-century French realism. In it, a spinster is betrayed by her family and wants to get revenge, so she destroys everybody and everything--and in the end she wins. Earl and Bette are out there on their own, without the benefit of feminism, the gay rights movement, or the Black Power movement. The idea of a community thinking out loud about their own condition has not yet occurred. They had to figure it out themselves.

Also from the late '50s, early '60s, is James Baldwin's Another Country--black and white and gay and straight--on these same streets, but the women in the book are not real people. Balzac, Baldwin, and 1950's kitchen-sink realism are all called "real," but how can that be so? The artist in me was intrigued.

CF: Bette has Valerie, a first-generation ad executive, as a female ally.

SS: Well, kind of, but to me, women who went into advertising in the 1950s and '60s are sort of like the women who became psychoanalysts fifty years earlier. New fields have room for women; old fields do not. But the irony of women in advertising is that they ended up making a lot of money and getting a lot of autonomy, but at the expense of women in general. Advertising is the enemy of women. The woman [Shirley Polykoff] who came up with the [Clairol] campaigns, "If I have one life to live, let me live it as a blonde" and "Blondes have more fun," was a Jewish brunette contributing to white supremacy. So you get this kind of "power feminism," which came at a high cost for women, though not for individual women.

CF: The kind of community you depict in The Cosmopolitans will never happen again, not in the contemporary cities. So what do we have now--Facebook?

SS: For me, personally, Facebook is very rich. I've gotten so much out of it on so many levels. The international information is extraordinary. In a matter of seconds, I can find things out from all over the world, and not from news media. I've been able to put out ideas and get many, many responses. Conflict is Not Abuse is a book that I basically wrote using Facebook. I'd put out a thought and get so many suggestions and responses. But you also have to practice restraint. The cruelty between the Hillary and Bernie people has been outrageous, but I don't delete or block that stuff because it's part of what I'm working on. The pro-Israel crazy people do horrible things to me: they alter my Wikipedia page, they post vicious things. But what I have realized is that if I just let them express their opinions and move on, nothing terrible happens. I'm not diminished in any way. Only when I get on their level do I get diminished.

Chris Freeman, a longtime contributor to The G&LR, teaches English and gender studies at USC.

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Excerpt from The Cosmopolitans by
Sarah Schulman

Chapters 1 & 2

∞ ACT ONE ∞

Chapter 1

Bette's windows framed a movie of the world in lacerating color, solitary black and white. All was below, and yet knowable, from the second floor. Real theaters charged fifty cents for matines and were easy to attend. But, sunken in the seats of Loews or the Eighth Street Cinema or the film house on Bleeker, looking up instead of down, she was diminished and felt controlled. Bette could never ignore the simple fact that what passed on the screen had already been seen by multitudes before her. Each time the projector clanged its reels, the characters reached an identical conclusion.

How can one story unfold the same way under so many different circumstances?

It could not. She didn't care for it.

She preferred the art cinema near Sixth Avenue, down the block from Nedick's hot dogs and orange drink. The films there were in French and Italian, with inadequate explanations in small print below the action or slapped across the actors' faces. It was more like

life, where she could come to her own understanding of events by assessing gesture, facial expression, and body language. Her apartment's windows offered this gift as well, but in panoramic variation so that the simultaneity of our lives became irrefutable. That we're all in this together. Musical, drama, romantic comedy, cartoon, suspense, cops and robbers, animal tale, even stag. Silent and talkie. Who needs Hollywood when there's Tenth Street? The show is always playing and it's always up for free.

As a girl in Ohio, it had to come from within. The dirt was so clean, it shouldn't be called dirt. It was empty, she could wash in it. No sign of man and his use of life. No passersby. There was a magic lantern show and then a nickelodeon. The newsreels rolled in with the war and she attended regularly, searching systematically for signs of her brother in France until he came home unscathed, with no stories, having only learned to smoke. The banality of it all turned her away from movies and made her a fan of the stage. Real life in real time, whether a carnival sideshow at the Ashtabula County Fair or Carousel on Broadway. Act One. Intermission. Act Two. Change is inevitable. What looks like nothing can become cataclysm. And then, of course, resolve. In Ohio, transformation was an elusive desire, but in the city, the theater of change constantly displayed itself before her. She'd have her coffee by that window, following the high jinks of those beloved weedy city trees, survivors who grow, sway, shade, bend, lose and build their leaves like matinee idols. The stars of the street were the streets. Surrounded by architectural forests. The trunks of

buildings turned dark with rain, burned dry, skidded with ice, and then preened in calm camaraderie. There were canyons for folks below who navigate natural ravines that float, freeze over, and sizzle the path to each person's dream. Set, costumes, soundtrack, and special effects all by chance. No dirt. It was all constructed with something in mind. An idea.

Almost time for the 6:00 p.m. show, so Bette sat up in her chair by the window. First on was Mrs. O'Reilly, sending seven-year-old Margaret to Joe's Fish Market across University Place. Bette saw Mrs. O'Reilly slap wet arms out on her windowsill, propelling her neck and then head, hovering over the street. Their building was a ship and Mrs. O'Reilly's profile their masthead, as the whole structure sailed forth behind her. Downstairs, on the corner, Margaret stood, pigtails tight, fist clenched around two dollars and a list of what to buy. Bette could see Joe through the plate glass windows of his shop, big belly, black mustache, thick glasses, shoveling fishy ice aside to haul up a slab of cod, expertly wrapping it in an old page of the Daily Sun. All the actors were in place, waiting for the streetlight to let them go.

And then it began. Mrs. O'Reilly seized the green moment, stretched even farther into the air over Romanoff's Pharmacy; the light flashed and she yelled out, "Cross!"

Margaret obeyed, knowing she was safe this way. Margaret liked to do as she was ordered and always would because she had her own concerns, and obeying made it easier to engage them secretly with passion. Outside responsibilities were assigned and

she followed, ever imagining that she'd be a nurse and someday ride a horse. That her father would come back to them and that school would magically and mercifully end. That her mother would get a radio and then a telephone, and that her green jumper would be miraculously clean by the next morning and more instructions would await on her breakfast plate. She did not understand the trance in which she lived as a warm heartn protecting her from her mother's sadness. But it was.

Joe saw her coming and waved up to Mrs. O'Reilly with his favorite hand signal, a-okay, as he opened the front door in welcome. A shopkeeper should treat his customers with love. They needed that and so did he. His son was in Korea, and Joe hoped someone was being kind to him. That's how it worked—I see you and then you see him. Recognition, that's the key. Joe gave fishtails away to the poor and special ordered a whole striped bass when someone had a wedding or anniversary or graduated first in their class. When his son came home, his wife would make the boy a white-fish stew with peppers and onions and a baked potato with butter. Bluefish was the local crop, right off the coast of Long Island, as plentiful as stray cats. Thank God for Catholics, they have to have their fish. And the Jews chop theirs up once a year with some blistering horseradish.

Joe wasn't religious himself, but he knew that faith created order, and order was necessary to avoid the kinds of confusing wars that had sent his son away. He loved his Joe Jr. He didn't know how a person could live hating their own children, but there was plenty of evi-

dence of that everywhere he looked. He loved Margaret O'Reilly and he loved his fish. Margaret's mother had a hard time of it and had buckled down to her task. He wished she could show her child more love, less duty. Joe enjoyed it all, and he wanted Mrs. O'Reilly to feel the same way. He loved his apron and his cleavers and his old fedora and the keys that locked and unlocked the front door of his shop. This was the life.

Bette watched these relationships, filled with promise and threat. They all lived in front of each other, together. There was no pretending one was better than the other. Too late for that. "Everything has two faces," Balzac wrote. "Even virtue." That was one good thing about Ohio, it had made her a reader. *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* and little David Copperfield all grown up. There would never be a paucity of good books. It was something always to look forward to. As dependable as the coming of evening's shadow.

Bette leaned a bit farther out the window to scan down the avenue, past Rubin's Deli, toward the singing, swinging, loafing branches of Washington Square Park. She checked to see if Earl had chosen that route home.

Rubin had lox for sale, bagels, bialys, pletzel. He had fresh wet farmer cheese in wax paper to cradle herring, smoked whitefish, smoked carp. Global purple onions exploded with demands next to the complimentary red tomatoes and hanging, greasy smoked kippers that the old men loved to eat. Next door to him sat the watchmaker, wild white hair, a single eyepiece, and devotion to minutiae. On the diagonal was Barney Josephson's new hamburger place, the Cookery. He

used to run Café Society and his wife Gloria worked for the poor Rosenbergs. Everyone in the neighborhood knew her, and everyone in the world knew them. Bette and Earl had discussed their fate, followed it closely in the newspapers. There was so much to understand. What is a spy? Can any person be one? Treachery is wrong, but which loyalty is more important, to the present or to the future? How could a secretary, like Ethel Rosenberg, outwit the United States? Bette was herself a secretary and it didn't seem possible. That's a small life. She knew it for a fact. If she wanted to betray her country, she wouldn't imagine where to begin. That's top information, not bottom.

Earl thought they were innocent, but Bette thought it was more complicated than that. They could have done "it" and still be innocent. She and Earl had listened to the radio together the night the Americans incinerated Hiroshima, and they both knew immediately that this was wrong. Now that the Soviet Union had the atom bomb, we Americans could never do that again. We could not take that much life at one time because then it would happen back to us. Tit for tat. It was a balance of power that keeps everyone civil. That's why Joe is nice to Margaret and Mrs. O'Reilly can buy on credit from time to time. Because we all have the ability to hurt each other equally, and as long as that's so, neighbors have incentives to stay on their best possible behavior. To be friends. Or at least friendly. At least to try. The Rosenbergs, dead for five years now, had been incinerated like Japan. But the Josephsons have a new baby boy, named Eddie. Life apparently goes on.

One of the most significantly positive occurrences in Bette's life was getting a corner apartment on the second floor. She could move to the bedroom and hear the children playing, the neighbors gossiping, and the birds hovering window height in the trees. The Italians liked to sit outside on folding chairs, even in the winter. They loved seeing who was coming home from work and hear everyone's grocery report. One boy, eight-year-old Salvatore, had a lemonade stand, two cents a glass. He also tried his hand at fortune telling, staring into an overturned cereal bowl, rubbing its contours. He had a future, this Salvatore, there were no limits to his entrepreneurial desires. Bette put down her penny, gave him a shot.

Sal furrowed and stretched in imitation of concentration. He caressed the bowl and closed his eyes. He took no chances, this Salvatore. Even he knew that Bette was a woman of a certain age, and so her life was in place and somewhat prescribed. Yet, there was still room for one last big adventure. One last enjoyable transformation before all the losing began. She wondered if this change would actually take place or just loom and then one day be surpassed.

"What do you see?" Bette asked the boy.
"I see . . . that you . . . will . . . go for a walk," he said.
"I think you're right," Bette nodded, reassured.
"What else?"

Sal closed his eyes. First tight, but then a vision appeared internally, and he seemed to read its prophecy on the insides of his own lids. "Wait!" His tiny pink lips pursed and then relaxed. "I see a . . . big change."
"You do?"

"I see a stranger, a mysterious stranger."

"Is she bearing gifts?" Bette chuckled to herself.

"No." Sal opened his eyes. "Her pockets are empty.

She only brings herself."

"And that will change everything? Her . . . self?"

"Yes," Sal said. And smiled, once again turning into a little boy with a delicate future.

"Okay," Bette said. "I'll keep a lookout."

It was dinnertime now all over the Village. Not too many takers for Salvatore's fresh squeezed. But always working until the last moment, the boy waited for his mother to come home before finally closing up shop. There she was! Back from the slaughterhouse on Sullivan Street with her fresh killed rabbit, soon to be dinner. She paused on the corner of Ninth, at Readers Stationery Store to pick up a copy of the *Mirror*, then smiled at her son, the cue for him to swallow the last rewarding drop.

On Tenth between University and Broadway, an art gallery had a wealthy visitor. A beige Bentley pulled up, then stood idling as the Negro chauffeur stepped out. He looked left and right at the folks on the street and then entered, hat in hand, through the gallery's front door. He had grace and training, this chauffeur. Clearly, he had prepared for some other profession. The Italians stared at the car, staying fixed in their folding chairs, postponing dinner preparations to enjoy the special event. Chauffeur was a good-looking man, his uniform matched the car.

The bells at Grace Episcopal Church finally tolled six. On cue, the poor and rich artists, the middle-class and destitute painters and floating sculptors climbed

out of their studios, scruffily distracted and ready for cocktails. Beer beckoned for now, followed later by whiskey, and right before dawn, a handful would have a great idea and stumble back to easel, floor, and wall. Willem de Kooning and an unknown would come to fistcuffs in about six hours, somewhere in the back of the Cedar Tavern. It could be over a girl they were both lying to or about, or a painting that really mattered.

The lady gallery owner and the chauffeur emerged from her store. They had obviously conferred. He opened the car's back door, and she climbed in to discuss with the sedan's mysterious owner. It was a mobile office for someone too grand to roam the streets. Too special to be seen. The car's windows were tinted black, so the neighbors could not peek inside. Children started to gather, and Salvatore daringly tried to press his nose against the glass. He decided right then and there that he, too, wanted a Bentley, and that when he had one, he would never come out, never satisfy the desires of others. Chauffeur did his duty and kept the bewitched children at bay. Finally, the gallery owner, a prim, muscular lady with a seductive smile, flowing hair, and a special suit, hurried out of the car so fast that Chauffeur didn't have a chance to hold open the door. She turned out the gallery's lights, locked up, and glided right back to the sedan with her purse and hat. This time he was ready and secured the sanctuary with an assured and assuring move. The car whisked away on its own cloud and this allowed everyone else to get back to their tasks of cooking, drinking, and loving. As they cried and celebrated together and alone. The Italians and the artists? They meet over com-

visits rent from the Italians or live next door to their vegetables and both overhear each other's Italian because he studied there, or romanced a tailor for his mother back home in Philadelphia was from Calabria. Once one sculptor and his neighbor enjoyed a recording of Maria Callas singing *Norma* together and shared a pack of cigarettes, but that was more out of a novel than for real. It was a *LIFE* magazine moment, and yet it happened. Mostly the two worlds rarely met, just passed each other by on the same quiet street, coming and going to opposing destinations. More likely, Salvatore and a painter's daughter would both go to Washington Square Park, tear off their clothes, and run into the same water fountain to dance around topless in their underpants when it got too hot for decorum. Would they recognize each other and wave? Yes. Maybe later Sal will grow to love paintings and cross the line. Maybe the girl will despise the men who lied to her mother in the back of Cedar Tavern and find a nice reliable Italian boy to marry and feed.

There is the tailor in his shop window. Bette could see him pull on the sewing machine cover, fasten its snaps. He cares for that machine, oils it and dusts it. All his dreams are there, his children's futures, God willing. Every night he rolls his shirtsleeves back over his concentration camp number, locks up for the night, and goes home to Washington Heights. As he pulls the front door shut and puts on his outside hat, the guests at the Albert Hotel next door are just beginning to roll out of their cages. Last night's mascara still running. They pick up their relief checks from wooden mailboxes stacked behind the front desk. Once again it's too late

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in the day to cash them at the bank. The desk clerk says no for the hundredth time, ignores an offer of a sexual favor, and gets back to marking his notebook. The queens shrug, scrounge for a cigarette. Start to think about coffee and . . . *then what?*

On Tenth Street, a brownstone built in 1880 is for sale for \$30,000. In the middle of the block. But who has \$30,000? The Italians, the painters, Mrs. O'Reilly, Joe, the hotel residents in their *outré laissez faire* allure, Rubin the deli guy, Romanoff the white Russian pharmacist, the tailor, and our friend Bette all shake their heads. *Who has that kind of money?* they wonder. And this thought unites them, although they do not realize why. The art dealer's secret friend could buy it, of course, but she already has a townhouse of her own, in the east Fifties. Only Bette knows that the building in question figured prominently in a novel by the great Edith Wharton, as did the Grace Episcopal Church, whose bells have now completed their ringing. Bette realized this midpage and ran outside so quickly to take a peek that the book fell to the floor. She stood on the sidewalk and stared at the grand home, its great windows, sweeping stairs, and copper face. It was true, she knew, that she lived in a novel right here in New York. They all did. And a painting. And a factory. And a dreamland. That is to say, a film.

The young writer clerking the Albert Hotel's night shift studies at City College to become a teacher so that he can earn a real living instead of writing his books from behind the hotel's front desk. This boy, named Sam, has also read the same Edith Wharton novel. But he never put two and two together. And he never would.

"It's a world of good," Earl knew. That was clear. "You show them that you see who they are, you show respect, honor them with a greeting, and then move to a corner so they don't worry that you want something more."

Chapter 2

"You establish," Bette summarized.

"Exactly."

And so their understanding was born.

Turned out the apartment next to Earl's had long stood empty, and so on a hot August afternoon, she moved in. It didn't take but one trip up the stairs, everything Bette owned was in her arms.

"That's what makes New Yorkers tough," Earl realized, watching her sweat from so little labor. "It's not the crime or whatnot. I'm telling you, it's the weather. The winter is too cold, the summer is too hot, and spring lasts a week and a half."

Winter was too cold. Not colder than Ohio of course, but several months of three or four feet of snow in a city that just can't rest is a lot of work. That's for sure.

For the next thirty years, Bette and Earl discussed the length of each New York spring.

"This one is three whole weeks!" Bette would say with joy, when it applied.

"Like I said," Earl repeated when necessary. "Spring in New York only lasts a week and a half."

Earl lived there with a white boy named Anthony, who was a real cut-up and a distant good looker. Anthony had the place originally and then invited Earl to share it with him. But when things soured between the boys, Anthony was decent enough to not inform the landlord, and let Earl keep the apartment. Eventually

On April 4, 1928, Bette arrived by bus to Manhattan Island. For a whole month she avoided the trolleys, double-deckers, and elevated trains as she could not imagine how to approach them. Instead, young Bette stayed in her rooming house on West Twenty-Fifth Street and walked to every destination, finding a counter job at an all-night diner on Sixty-Second and Eighth Avenue. Coming home too late through the Irish slum of Hell's Kitchen, she wondered about her safety and how to assess it. The cook from the diner, a Negro boy named Earl, also a tender twenty years of age, kindly escorted her and started to explain what then became obvious. In New York City there were all sides of the track on the same block. And that's the key to how the machine churned.

"When you walk into a place, you say, 'Hi, how're you doing?'" Earl instructed. "And then you go to the other side of the room."

"Well, what good is that?"

the original owner died and when his son came to inspect the place, Earl's tenancy was a "fait accompli."

"What's that mean?"

"It means," Earl said, "that it's yesterday's news."

A lonely breeze swept through Anthony's absence, until the night he just reappeared and suddenly everything was back to normal.

It was clear to Bette from the start that there was no romantic future between herself and Earl or herself and Anthony. Or really herself and anyone. What had happened back home was still burning inside, it was still alive and growing and it was going to take more than some nice-looking fellows. It was like she'd been whipped and never able to get hold of some balm. The sores kept opening, opening, crusting and cracking. She'd see a couple with their child walking down the street, not questioning their bond, and this pain of absence would crawl up her throat and beat at the backs of her eyes until they bled. She felt the venal drip, too thick for tears. But by the time she'd made it to a mirror, it was always gone.

So, one night when Anthony casually draped his arm around Earl's shoulder, she understood that that was the way it was and a kind of joy exploded in Bette's chest. She would never have to explain herself. She would never be the most endangered. She would love Earl and Anthony and they would love her, and that's all there was to it. No worry. That precise night she relaxed. That was the most relaxing night of her life. That was the moment she first told anyone about Frederick.

She entranced Earl and Anthony for hours with

her own secret catalog of detail. After half the night had passed, the men went out for a bucket of beer and returned right away, having thought a great deal about her story and wanting to hear more. The compassion. The three sipped that sweet beer and the sparrows' wings fluttered in the night. Even after the graveyard-shift workers stumbled back from the docks and the streetlights came on again, the three of them talked. The boys asked the right thoughtful questions and they cared about the answers. They nodded and commented with recognition. Earl took her hand and said, "I understand."

No one in Bette's life had understood or even said that they did, and now she had both gifts in one person. Now she could burn, bleed, and talk about what that was like, and there would be no problem. As she spoke, Bette started to see her own self more clearly. She started to discover things that silence had camouflaged. Bette found herself recalling details and attributing meaning to those details that all the internal repetition in her mind had kept under wraps. From this day forward Bette lived her life by thinking and then discussing her thoughts with Earl. It was the only combination that worked. In a way, she realized that this was why she had come to New York after all, to find someone to talk to. Now that she'd found him, her life would make sense. Bette was reassured.

At first there was an ice box, gas light, and a coal-burning furnace in the cellar. The ice man's horse brayed for oats, snapping its heels on the cobblestoned streets. Knickers and caps were the style for young men, and Earl kept that going for a while. Anthony

brought home fashion magazines from the printing factory from time to time, and Bette glanced at them but never really tried to be a flapper. It was only after the triumph of registering to vote that she stepped out on her own and appeared at dinner suddenly with a bob. Both Bette and Earl were staunch Democrats, but Anthony just didn't care much and took his vote for granted. As time passed, her short hair became more convenient than meaningful, and she'd dressed accordingly ever since. Long legs, short skirts, strands of beads over flat chests were never to be Bette's natural encasement. So when fuller dresses came back, she felt more at home and was relieved. A modest skirt and sweater really worked for Bette. It gave her privacy to feel.

Of course she drank illegal whiskey, they all did. The Fronton Club on Washington Place was a special treat. Earl pointed out Edna St. Vincent Millay drinking alone and this impressed Bette. Both that he recognized her and that Millay did whatever she cared to do. Charlie's Place was where Earl and Anthony could camp, as there were plenty of male couples and women making love to each other all around them. Bette looked at it all blankly. Romance held no appeal. She was still torn to pieces by Frederick's cruelty. She simply could not see how a person made the decision to behave that way. Until she understood, she would not be interested in men again. Chunley's was the most romantic of the illegal spots. From the outside, Bette couldn't perceive a thing, not a stir, voice, or sway until they passed through a sleepy courtyard as the bouncer watched from a gated peephole in the old wooden door.

Suddenly, when Anthony, Earl, and Bette were understood to be, of all things, desirable, he swung open the thick wooden portal, beckoning them into the deafening roar. That's why it was called the Roaring Twenties, she realized some decades later. Because those hidden places were capsules of explosive sounds of joy.

These speakeasies were the grand places where the three friends planned their futures, and so did all the city dwellers. Whiskey was a hope machine, and if one used it to be emboldened, dreams could certainly come true. Earl made up his mind one drunken night to be an actor, and the next day started going uptown to play small parts in basements and to midtown once in a while to play a spear-carrier. Bette and Anthony and Earl went out to see plays together and then read the scripts out loud at home. Bette had already started her secretarial courses and took off her waitress uniform for good when she got a job at Tibbs Advertising Incorporated as a stenographer. It was a big debate between the three of them as to whether she should save her white-collared server's dress and apron just in case, but she just decided to burn the thing. So, one night at 2:00 a.m., the three comrades went to Washington Square Park and set it on fire in a trash can while doing a wild dance.

The market crashed in 1929, but they didn't really feel it until 1932 when Anthony got fired from the printing plant. Bette held on to her job, but Earl had to start hacking slabs of beef in the meatpacking district where a lot of Negroes ended up. Prohibition was soon repealed to give the unemployed some way to eat up their pain, but no one could afford to go out for drinks

anyway. Being on the skids financially affected Anthony terribly. Normally, Earl would leave the house at four in the morning, Bette at seven thirty, and Anthony at eight. So traditionally she and Anthony would share a cup of coffee before they both began their day. Now, she'd leave him in the mornings with his wifebeater and cigarette, where he remained until her return. The only thing that had changed was his beard. Anthony suffered, and so did their neighbors. Evictions took place with regularity, and Bette found herself on the street with a crying neighbor, helpless and unknowing how to comfort or correct. She lacked so much knowledge for soothing others. It was startling. How pointless she both felt and was. How useless. Anthony suffered for three more years, and they lived off pieces of discarded meat that Earl could bring home from the slaughterhouses. Finally, Anthony decided to go to see his parents and learn if it was true that they would never help him out no matter how bad it had gotten and how deep his need.

That first night was a strange night. Anthony had been expected home from the Bronx for dinner, and Earl and Bette waited without any discussion. They silently agreed. But by ten, it was clear something had happened, and they devoured the overfried potatoes and beef pieces. The next day he returned, shaved and with a new shirt that was too big on him, as if he had shrunk. He couldn't look either of them in the eye, and in his private time with Earl something terrible passed between them. The next day Anthony sat at Bette's table smoking a cigarette and then lurched suddenly and ran into his place next door. She heard

him rummaging, opening and slamming drawers, and then watched him take his belongings in Earl's suitcase, wearing Earl's old newsboy cap. He was gone. Eventually, Earl learned that Anthony had returned to his father with the promise to get married, and that in 1937 he had gotten married. In 1939, when Earl saw him across the room in a bar for men, Earl begged him to return home, offering every possible promise, but the problem at the core of the negotiation was that Earl had not done anything wrong. So there was really nothing he could fix. The day after Pearl Harbor, Anthony signed up, and like so many with nothing to live for and so many with every hope in their breast pocket, he was killed in the Pacific. His wife became his widow, with all titles and benefits.

These events altered Earl and Bette. They switched places. At first when Anthony disappeared, Earl was stunned into silence. Then he tried to brush it off. This went on for years, they barely mentioned it. While a kind of forced normalcy took the place of grief, the resuming of regular activities seemed empty and uneventful. But once Earl encountered Anthony in that bar, once he had begged his love and been denied, then everything was out on the table.

Anthony looked at Earl as though from within a fog. His face was slack, his eyes were unfocused, his mouth was flat.

"I'm not in love with you, and I'm not attracted to you," Anthony lied.

"You just want to be married and have men on the side so your father will love you," Earl said, and then regretted it. Perhaps if he had lied to Anthony as well, he would have eventually come home.

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This is what plagued Earl forever after. If he had lied to the liar, perhaps he could have had him back. But instead he'd told him the truth. It was his fault.

Earl sat in Bette's apartment night after night and cried. He repeated his feelings, did not know how to change them. She understood this, of course, and now

Bette was the experienced one. She knew what unjustified abandonment was like. She knew what betrayal meant. She knew. Frederick. Frederick. And so, somehow Bette and Earl became equals in knowledge. This

is when their mutual understanding deepened. This is when their friendship turned as permanent as the ocean, as mysterious, as unquestioned, as wild, clean, and as endless. There had now been cycles of reliability, of compassion, of each one pulling the other's weight.

It was all proven now. All clear. Earl found other men, but they never carried the same density, his interests were never as carefree. Everything was fraught. And even when Anthony died pointlessly, that pattern got worse. If Anthony had survived, he would have found his wife unbearable. But because Earl had told him the truth, he had fled into the arms of the enemy. Dead on a beach, barely making it to shore.

Over time, Earl and Bette came to the understand-

ing that they shared a fatal flaw, one that set them apart from other people. They could both love completely, only once. It was a curse and yet a fact, and this is what had brought them to each other, this recognition. The one grace bestowed. In this particular emotional state, neither of them would ever be alone.

Now, it is 1958, and Bette's apartment's decor is more a product of the thirties and forties than this moment. Having come with nothing, every single object

had to be acquired. Nothing was handed down and few belongings arrived as gifts. For the most part, her possessions were selectively and carefully purchased or appeared by accident as neighbors moved or sold petty items out of desperation. An old crocheted lace doily sat underneath a crystal candy dish. The dish had represented a whim for occasional caramels, but now it held sewing needles and thread. A metal washbasin stored neatly underneath the sink, behind a light green curtain she replaced every few years. This basin was crucial as she used it daily to soak underwear and sore feet. Toes in the tub, sewing in her lap, she'd lean back into her rocking chair and rest. That chair came from a church sale on Carmine Street, and she'd carried it home herself even though it felt ridiculous to haul furniture through the neighborhood. Men did that, she well knew, but Earl was at work and she would not ask a stranger. She had arms, after all.

When the load got to be too much, she'd set the chair upright and rock for a few minutes on the sidewalk—first at Ninth Street by Trude Heller's nightclub advertising Carmen McRae, and then a block later in front of the New School for Social Research where refugee intellectuals from Europe tried to figure out what had gone wrong. Each task had its place. There was a quiet but eccentric pleasure in rocking one's self outside on the sidewalk. Passersby would smile or ignore as they had other tasks before them. This was her city, after all. And she could be as singular as the lot of them.

Supper was always important for Bette and Earl, a sign of civility and reliance. She used linen napkins every day and always set the table with love. Bette

locked at the clock again. Eight o'clock! Both pillows were askew on Earl's waiting chair, so she prepared them for his arrival. Plumped quietly. Smiled. Normally it was quiet in Bette's apartment and very light. But not at this moment because it was finally night.

Earl was uncharacteristically late. Of course he was a freewheeler and often had adventures coming home. He'd stop off someplace for relief of some kind or be moody and sit out overlooking the river. He'd have a drink alone or with others or just walk off all the frustration of his day. But sooner or later he would show up for supper, and he would always appreciate that it was there. This night, however, the realm of the unusual had come to bear. The stars were coming out, others were completing their dinners and crawling into the evening's embrace. Bette looked, paced, rearranged, turned the radio on and off. She even sat and stared out the window at the street light's yellowed glow, how it cast shadows on a young fellow waiting for the bus. He had changed his clothes and seemed to bounce with anticipation. Was he headed uptown for a look or a meal or a walk or to visit a friend? Was he going to Times Square for a show, or to play Skee-Ball and eat at the Automat or Yorkville for a goulash, or did he have a dance hall or movie in mind? The bus would take him anywhere he wanted to be. So, what did he want? What was he thinking? What song was he singing? The green bus rolled up, illuminated from within, and the boy swung on, tossing his nickel into the basket, and slid onto a yellow seat of woven straw. Now it was the moment for Bette to imagine that something had gone wrong.

(Just then, a reversal occurred in which the key

turned suddenly in the lock. That is the most comforting sound in a person's life, isn't it? When the other uses his own key to finally come home. Behind this happiness was Earl himself, a bottle of cold beer wrapped in newspaper, tucked under his arm. He dropped the curative keys into his worn cloth jacket pocket and threw it onto the hook, the one he had installed for this very purpose. He was exhausted. This wasn't the renewed expression of a postwork recovery, Bette saw right away. Instead, Earl's long-nosed, still handsome, but sunken face fronted a tired, depleted fifty-year-old man who had come directly home from working with animal carcasses without a chance to breathe or grieve over what kind of day after day fate had handed him. And how he could not imagine a way for that to change.

Excerpt from The Cosmopolitans, on advertising, marketing

and television

This new arrangement also transformed Bette's approach to her job. Now, instead of reading a book or daydreaming about a piece of music heard alone the night before, she would wait for the bus across the street with a kind of energetic glow. She always got a seat because her stop was at the beginning of the line, and from that perch, she'd comfortably watch out the window as the bus crawled up Madison Avenue. Looking at the people around her and starting to wonder what their reaction would be to *television advertising*.

Not that she really knew what that was, but this was the subject now discussed in the office all day long, five days a week, and there was no point in pretending it wasn't happening. Why not at least try to understand? She had nothing to lose and it could be interesting. Change.

Newer riders came on board the bus, and by the north side of Union Square there were never any seats left. She saw their expressions of disappointment, realizing they would have to stand. How, even though they'd already known when they woke up that there would be no seat, they were upset about it. No one wants to stand on their way to work. People have desires, needs that don't meet their realities. And yet those wishes do not disappear. She had made her wishes disappear. Now she wanted to rediscover what they actually were. Every day was a surprise with Hortense. And every day was a surprise at Tibbs Advertising. It was exciting. In fact, it was fun. The value of a day was entirely different, Bette noted. It was not something to be endured, but instead to be enjoyed. *That's what change can bring*, she thought. And laughed to herself out loud. The man reading the *New York Post* in the next seat stubbed out his cigarette. He looked at her and smiled. *People are moved by happiness*. She felt moved herself when she realized that happiness is more than getting through without pain.

This morning, when she entered the office, Hector was in his usual frenzy of worry. He was doing so much, but he had no idea what he was doing. Lately, Bette had been more willing to try to help him. That was the thing about healing. It only happened when something

was made right. If nothing was ever made right, there was only so much that one could do. But with Hortense's appearance and Bette's chance to have relatives finally—well, that mattered. It wasn't just willpower, it was substantial. And it made her feel better toward Hector. Someone was fair to her and so she had more to give. That's how it worked. A person just could not do it all on their own. It was a proven fact. Bette was almost ready to say that she and Hector were in there *together*, after all. But she still didn't grasp exactly how. All that was clear was that Hector was in over his head, and she felt a new kind of sympathy. An interest. This particular morning he was already pacing before she'd even hung up her sweater.

"Bette, I need you to take shorthand."

She could not bring herself to call him *Mr. Tibbs* after a lifetime of calling him Hector. So for the moment, she refrained from calling him anything at all.

"It's important."

"Be right over."

She draped her sweater casually over her chair and grabbed her steno book and a pencil, always kept sharpened in its holder.

The important subject so badly in need of immediate documentation was indeed something momentous. Accepting that he could never forge this new pathway alone, Hector had been advised by a friend on the New Haven Line commuter club car to hire a consultant. This was a new kind of job emerging in American business, and Hector's friend encouraged him to "get on board." Three Canadian Club and sodas later, Hector

was convinced that experts were now available for all to engage, instead of being secreted away in the most powerful corners of the Pentagon. So, for a fee, even a small guy like him could take advantage of their "know-how."

This morning he was interviewing his first consultant, a very lively, young, bright, and, well, brassy blonde named Valerie Korie, who had beaten both him and Bette to the office by a good fifteen minutes.

Prompt, that one, Bette noted.

Valerie was the smart, independent type, there to offer the service of her mind. She was an expert at having ideas, imagining things, and making them come true. She was hired to think, to think of things no one else could come up with, to put seemingly unrelated themes together and to make them click. Her clothing confirmed these talents. Not necessarily the A-line skirt, but the bag and shoes of different colors and the seemingly masculine watch, prominently displayed on her wrist instead of a bracelet.

"Like it?" Valerie asked, noticing Bette's gaze.

"Why . . . yes."

"It's waterproof and shockproof. Omega."

"The last letter of the Greek alphabet," Bette answered, surprising herself.

"Exactly! The be-all and end-all of . . . time."

Hector took his place behind his desk, Valerie had the visitor's chair. Black leather, soft and pliant. Bette sat in her usual hardback, best for taking notes.

"Listen up, Hector," Valerie snapped, not giving him a moment to take the reins.

Bette looked over at his reaction. Valerie's big smile,

red lips, and matching tight red sweater were very effective. He seemed grateful to not have to be in charge.

Although trying to remain professionally skeptical, Bette immediately saw the girl's appeal. Valerie was the 1958 version of the 1920s woman. What Hortense seemed to be aspiring to. This was a type that hadn't been around for, well, decades. With the Depression and the war effort, the independent gal who used to be a regular part of daily life had seemed to disappear. And Bette hadn't noticed, until just this second. But here she was, coming back into style, and it was refreshing. Perhaps that had happened to Bette herself, without even understanding it. American women had become reticent, and she'd lost some of her own pizzazz. Luckily, these young ones were reinvigorating the mold. Of course there would be adjustments for the modern age. This crop were not radicals, they were professionals. But the last crew had won the right to vote, so Bette felt excited to see what a different, grand revolution Valerie's kind would achieve. The 1958 model was sleek, slick, bright scarf, sharp heels. Looks, Bette reflected, are a big part of it. She meant business.

"I mean business, Hector. And business, as every American knows, means power."

Business means power, Bette wrote on her steno pad.

"Bring me in as a consultant for your firm, and I will expand Tibbs Incorporated into a vibrant, competitive advertising agency so that you can Market Tomorrow to America Today."

She speaks in slogans, Bette noted. Convenient for shorthand.)

"Great!"

That was Hector. Whatever Valerie said was fine with him. His goals had proved beyond his grasp, so as long as someone could think of something he wouldn't have to do it. He smiled, and then crinkled his brow.

"But, how?"

"Good question. This requires . . ." She leaned in as though to whisper the answer, but then laughed, flipped her hair back, and trumpeted. "HARD SELL."

Bette wrote the words *hard sell* and then added three exclamation points.

"As opposed to . . . ?" Hector leaned in so close that he was practically lying on his desk, grasping for the answer.

"Guess," Valerie cooed.

"Soft?"

She nodded. He was learning. Bette was too, and so far, so good.

As Valerie explained it, *marketing* was what they needed to move into television. This corresponded strongly to what Hector had suspected, but what marketing actually was remained a bit of a mystery. It was different from advertising because of the element of subtlety. Advertising, as far as Hector was concerned, had always meant encouraging people to buy something. But marketing had to do with making people *feel* differently. So that they would then be better predisposed toward purchasing the thing. Toward wanting it. More. Marketing was some kind of modern science that involved how people think, and their desires. It was deeper, speaking to more human truths. A new realm of understanding that could not be overlooked.

"Television will reach EVERYONE!" Valerie proclaimed.

How? Bette wondered.

"We want ALL of America to understand our ads," Valerie said. "It's DEMOCRATIC!"

This further intrigued Bette. How could all the people understand the same thing? Was marketing the way to get her family to understand that her life mattered? For the men who ran the theaters to understand that Earl needed a part? Could marketing erase inequality, and let all people's feelings be seen on an elevated plane?

"How?" asked Hector.

"Ask your secretary."

Suddenly all eyes were on Bette. This had never happened before. She had never once been called upon in a meeting to give an official opinion. All her guidance had been sought by the Tibbs men privately, in quiet conversation. When Hector was a boy playing under the desks, she'd put bandages on his knees and helped him when he lost his glasses. Yet, she had never considered actually participating in conversations like this one. Of actually having a voice.

"You're an emblematic American," Valerie bestowed, as though this were a good thing.

"I'm not sure," Bette said.

"We'll see."

Valerie turned to face Bette entirely. Like they were having a romantic tête-à-tête in the Russian Tea Room, and no one else in the world existed. She shone her light on Bette. And the rest of the world was obscured.

"Now, Bette. Tell me. What values do you look for when choosing something?"

That was a bigger question than Bette had anticipated, and she started thinking about what the true answer might be.

"Or . . . " Valerie cooed. "Someone."

This follow-up was so insinuating, it carried the weight of its own frisson. Bette was actually flustered. The idea that she would choose someone spoke to something forbidden, unseenable. And yet this woman saw that it was there. Potential.

"So?"

"Yes?"

"So, tell me, Bette. When you go to the market to do your grocery shopping, what kind of soap do you buy?"

That was easy.

"The least expensive."

Valerie came a bit closer. Bette could inhale her perfume. Promising, like an unripe apricot. Bette could see the hint of her cleavage. It was all a tease, wasn't it? Suggestions of something more. That was Valerie's lure.

"So!" Valerie eureka'd. Her enjoyment was infectious. What had once been a dreary day at the office had become a huge romp in the snow. A free-for-all of fun. "You let THEM decide for YOU?"

Now, here was yet another thing that Bette had never considered.

"You let THE PEOPLE WHO SET THE PRICES determine what you will hold in your hand every single morning? What will touch your face?"

Bette had truly never thought about things this way, and she was intrigued to examine her own habits. In fact, she wanted to. She wanted to know herself better as much as she wished to understand her own time,

this historic moment—where was the society headed? She realized she'd like to know.

Valerie explained carefully that the ways that "things" were going were called *trends*. And that these trends no longer happened by chance or because of huge global events like wars and floods. They now were dreamed up in offices, just like this one, and then marketed to the rest of the world. A new sector was in charge, and governments would realize this and have to follow. Basically, Valerie explained, from now on people would only buy things on purpose, instead of by accident. And people like Valerie and Hector—if he was lucky—would be the ones to decide what others would own. For a handsome fee, of course.

"Wake up!" Valerie sang, like Mary Martin in *South Pacific*. "You have the RIGHT to CHOOSE your own soap! The same way you have the RIGHT to CHOOSE your own man. It's YOUR world! TIDE or ALL!"

At first Bette thought that *tide* referred to the natural rhythm of waves, and *all* was eternity, but then she realized that Valerie was referencing the two boxes of laundry detergent that sat side by side at the Daitch Shopwell on University Place.

"That's what hard sell does, Bette." Valerie looked at her with an expression of reluctant truth, conveyed out of loyalty, for her own good. "It lets you decide."

"I see," Bette said. And then, remembering to take notes, wrote down the words *I decide*.

"I see," Hector said.

Bette had forgotten he was there.

"Now, Bette," Valerie led her to the next moment.

"What if you could have any brand of soap that you

wanted, regardless of price? What brand name most appeals to you?"

This time the answer just slid out. A thought she had never previously entertained became so obvious and on the top of her consciousness.

"Truthfully," Bette said. "I have always liked the name LUX."

Again Valerie rewarded her with a grateful smile, those big brown eyes, an expression of contentment bordering on the obscene.

"You see, Hector?" She spun around on her chair, reaffirming that this entire exhibition had been for his benefit so he could feel addressed and serviced. "Hard sell! LUXXURRYYY. Luxury," she purred. "Persuading people to imitate the habits of the idle rich."

Hector literally leapt from his seat with enthusiasm, then felt perplexed about where to go next, and so flopped back down again. Then he leaned back and assumed, for the first time since he had come into ownership of Tibbs Incorporated, an air of empowerment. "She likes LUX," he pointed out, delighted at having a perception. "But she doesn't buy it."

"Americans dream of being rich," Valerie retorted on the beat, with a gravitas previously reserved for the United Nations. "But they are NOT rich. This is a very important insight when you try to sell them something."

"But the rich don't wash dishes." Bette was practical at heart, and there had to be a place for that. Even though she, herself, no longer washed dishes. Now that Hortense was in her house.

"RIGHT! And they don't do their own shopping."

Bette had to admit that she still did her own shopping and wouldn't want it any other way.

"So," Valerie let out some more rope. "Wouldn't you rather *feel* rich while doing what poor people *have* to do?"

Yes, she would. The answer was obvious, even

though Bette wasn't poor, but she understood the logic. She had a secretarial job. That meant she could pay her rent, buy groceries, go to the doctor, see plays on Broadway, buy all the books she wanted, give something to charity, and count on a stable pension in her old age. Yet, Valerie's argument was illuminating, it was the *feeling* of being free that Valerie was after. And so another door was opened. Once Bette let herself buy LUX, she would keep buying it. The way she had come to the same job day after day. It would become known, stable. It would make her feel safe. And then someday an innovative personality in another office somewhere would come up with a marketing breakthrough that would make Bette feel strangely bold. On an impulse that had been fabricated, but would feel organic, she would try something new. Something she'd never even noticed before but had seen *advertised on television*. She searched her memory, scanning a picture of the supermarket shelves, settling on something previously invisible but subconsciously planted. Cutex. It sounded like LUX but it was hard to say why. Cutex. Was it the Texan? Or was he just Cute?

"What is Cutex?" she asked.
"Nail polish remover," Valerie answered, fanning her red-tipped fingers.
"Oh," Bette laughed. "First you would have to sell me the polish."

"NOW YOU GET IT!" Valerie was in love with Bette. Or at least that's how it *felt*. "STRATEGY! I could sell you anything if I had to. I could sell you fake nails, nail files, nail polish remover, and then I could sell you a salve to soothe your aching nails. If I need to sell it more than you need to buy it, you will buy it."

That, Bette came to understand, was the essence of hard sell. She looked up at her child boss. He was lost in Valerie's web. And so was Bette. Hector didn't have to worry any longer. Someone else would solve all the problems. He reached his decision without a moment's hesitation.

Hector put his hand out over the desk and rose to the occasion.

"Sold," he said.

And the deed was done.

A Note on Style

Honoré de Balzac's novel *Cousin Bette* (1846) is taught as a classic work of nineteenth-century French realism. Balzac was so committed to his task that he wrote ninety novels with a quill pen, worked in Paris while his girlfriend lived in the Ukraine, and died of caffeine poisoning after decades of drinking sixteen cups a day. I've always felt that the job of the novelist is to individualize other people, but it takes an irregular passion to see other people as "real." Both the real and the abstract, ultimately, have to coexist because the will to know others for who they actually are is unfortunately an out-of-social act that transcends the norm. This is what makes artists strange: the desire to see, understand, and articulate what lies beyond the facade. But to puncture someone's facade is to puncture their heart. And the facade of a society is more protected even than its individuals', so the quest to know is accompanied by alienation from those who don't want to know.

My novel also responds to a second iconic realist

work, *Another Country* (1962) by James Baldwin. Earl and Bette occupy the same world, time, and physical space as in Baldwin's novel. Both stories unfold in postwar New York bohemia, where rejected and marginalized people of different races and places on the spectrum of sexuality confront and try to come to terms with each other, both succeeding and failing. The failure is a unique urban failure because it represents a special hope, and is only made disappointing because of the optimism at its root. But for Baldwin, the men are more real than the women, and therefore more important. I want to, with hindsight, reassert into that historic moment that women have as much nuance, desire, contradiction, and, therefore, humanity as men, in fiction as well as in life. They are not pawns in a story, but full human beings with histories, contexts, and reactions. When acted upon unjustly, they experience consequences and they express those consequences. When the women have the same dimension as the men, we have an experience that is interactive. It is dynamic. And therefore more "real."

The Cosmopolitans occurs in the late 1950s in New York City, a place where "kitchen-sink realism" was dominating the works of film, theater, and literature that received approval and reward. At the same time, improvisation and abstraction were biting kitchen-sink's heels. Yet, for example, in painting, the abstract expressionists were benign in the face of McCarthyism, which persecuted realists. While abstraction can have a revolutionary impulse, it can also become cultural wallpaper. Jazz in the 1950s propels as equally toward incitement as it does to Muzak.

From this conjunction of the consequences of McCarthyism on cultural production, a new kind of American realism was established that prevails to this day. It firmly reflects the values of the dominant group, but can have riffs of formal innovation for enjoyment and variation that may be clever or fun. However, these engaging impulses do not disrupt the basic foundational requirements for both characters and authors: That only certain Americans deserve to become protagonists, emblematic of an era. That only certain kinds of writers can be both stylists and have gravitas of content and perspective.

This contemporary American variation on realism is so overbearingingly dominant that it now controls how we think about and describe our lives, not just what books we read. We have lost objectivity about this style, see it as neutral or "literary" or "midlist," when, in fact, it reflects values about contemporary social order and control as cohesive, sensical experiences. I have always believed that the form of a novel should be an organic expression of the emotions at the core of the piece. I have never created, nor responded to, work that repeats a known "style" and imposes it on top of its own people and events. In an expansive social moment, the understanding that new representations of under-depicted people and unexplored experiences dictate new styles would be welcomed as a broadening of point of view. We would want to see and internalize how different kinds of people experience the world in a desire to open ourselves to the broad variety of humanity. In a restricted or oppressive period, however, repetition of already known paradigms and ways of writing are em-

braced and privileged, as though the familiarity itself was a sign of quality.

Only two lines remain from the original *Cousin Bette*, and I leave them to the literary detectives to unearth. *The Cosmopolitans*, in homage to both its source material and the era in which it is set, hovers realistically between French realism, kitchen-sink realism, contemporary American realism, and abstraction. I also try to evoke the era through slight allusion to the Britishized American English that dominated commonly read translations at the time. Whether the source was Flaubert or Dostoyevsky, these novels often sounded, in English, like they were being recited by Katherine Hepburn. And so, that tone, in a way, represents the period for American readers.

The book is distinctly stylized to reflect its characters' specific emotional experience of the world. For it is the specificity of their experiences that guides their perceptions, which in turn produces their actions and thereby creates the story.