

The Favour of a Reply

by Stinson Carter

The invitation came engraved on the finest gilded cardstock. I tried to tuck it away in the pile of bills on my desk, but after ten years of tucking her away, I realized I could no longer keep our past in unopened envelopes and unreturned phone calls.

I was an awkward ex-pat Southerner trying to find my place at a new school in a foreign corner of the country with a grownup secret in my teenage head. And Audrey was the first person I ever told.

After my parents' divorce in Louisiana, we stopped going to church, I stopped going to private school, and the bank took back the house of my tree forts and Christmas mornings. My father lost his business, my mother lost her fairytale, and I lost any ideas I still had that the grownups can make anything better. My dad ran off to Seattle to build a new life, and my mom and I started over in a Transcendental Meditation community in Iowa. I was twelve. At fourteen, I left my mother and my mantra and moved to Seattle. Six months into living with my father, I found out why our Southern life had fallen apart. He sat me down one afternoon in our apartment, hesitated in putting his hand on my shoulder, and said, "I need to talk to you about the fact that your father is gay."

He drove me to school every morning with a "Hate Is Not A Family Value" bumper sticker on our car, which I was sure read "Homo On Board" to the other kids. I was a teenager living in the heart of Seattle Grunge cool—Kurt and Courtney lived *a block* from my high school—but all I cared about was recreating Southern normalcy. I needed polo shirts and baseball caps, a stash of Playboys and a spot on the soccer team. But mostly I needed a girl like Audrey.

It was winter formal, sophomore year, when I first noticed Audrey as more than just a face in the cafeteria. We both lost track of our dates somewhere between the pictures and the last dance, and found each other orphaned on the edge of the parquet. We were talking about finding our dates, secretly hoping they wouldn't find us, and waiting for the last song to play long enough that we'd have an excuse to dance.

It happened pretty fast—phone cords stretched under bedroom doors way past our bedtime, hiding hickeys under turtlenecks, and grinning at our friends' complaints about how they "hardly ever saw us anymore." We held off for two weeks before saying "love," and still thought we had taken our time.

I didn't ask her what she thought of the young bachelors always hanging around my house, and she didn't bring them up. "My dad's friends" became a euphemism for the great unspoken thing that I tiptoed around like an alcoholic parent or a dead sibling. I rehearsed my lines for months before finding the courage to tell her one night over mochas at a Capitol Hill coffee shop.

"I need to tell you that my dad is gay," I said, abruptly.

"I kinda already knew," she said, without pause. "Why are you so nervous?" she asked, grabbing my hand across the table.

For the first time in the two years since my father came out to me, I had finally found a safe place in the outside world. And Audrey was the keeper of that place. Whenever my father's life scared me, she was my retreat. When he had a date night and I didn't want to be home, I could run off to her big house on the golf course with the two parents and the dog. When my living room became a staging ground for Halloween drag makeup, she showed me how to laugh at my father's friends instead of cringe.

When it came time for college, we "just so happened" to pick the same small school in upstate New York. And we crossed the country together and continued on as if nothing but our geography had changed. I wanted some college life that wasn't connected to Audrey, but whenever we ventured into breakup territory, either in a fight or during our "we can't really be our first *and* last, can we?" talks, we would always turn back at the moment of truth; even though we'd become like children who've played so long together that their love turns to bickering.

In the middle of our sophomore year, on a rainy night four days before Christmas, her father's week-old Jaguar hydroplaned off a Portland highway into the Willamette River. Our perseverance together had made us unusually close for a couple our age, but her father's death made us family. We stopped fighting like children, but we quietly came to know that it was the children in us that needed each other the most.

Our choices for our semesters abroad should have told us where we were headed. I went to "study" in Amsterdam and she went to Nepal for an audience with the Dalai Lama. During the weeks before we left, there was some casual talk of an "open relationship," but my definition was practical while hers was theoretical. We kissed and cried and said goodbye at the Dutchess County Airport, assuring each other that we would make it through; as words like those come easy at 21.

In Amsterdam, I traded my preppy bangs and Abercrombie flannels for spikey hair and clubwear. I took ecstasy and shrooms, and danced in the hottest clubs with the meanest doormen. With this new life came new friends, and new girls. At a club one night with my tongue loosened with hashish and Heineken, I told a girl my darkest secret for the second time in my life. But this time there was no rehearsal, no fear—just a casual offhand mention of a gay dad. I had noticed when I'd try to talk to European girls that I had to spend twenty minutes proving I wasn't religious, Republican, capitalist—anything they saw as marks of the "Ugly American." But just the words "gay dad" were all the credentials I needed. And after that night, even just that moment, my secret

no longer needed a keeper. My five-year relationship with Audrey soon ended in a dozen emails between the computer lab at the University of Amsterdam and an Internet café in Katmandu.

She was there to meet me at the airport when I flew home. She was wearing too much makeup and her outfit was overly coordinated—the kind a girl lays out on her bed well ahead of the day it's planned for. We took a few long walks to talk things over—I tried to sound like a nice guy about it all and she tried to find a foothold in eyes that no longer saw her as a retreat, but instead as a regression.

Back at Vassar for our senior year, people mistook me for a transfer student. I was in the campus bar every night, I rolled hash cigarettes in public places, and pursued the girls who would've intimidated me in the past. I built my newfound confidence on the rejection of my former self, and Audrey couldn't help but be a part of it.

After graduation, I moved out to L.A. and Audrey went to grad school. There were phone calls every few months, but those eventually tapered off into the occasional news of her life from my father. Her importance in getting me through those years may have been lost on me for a while, but it was never lost on him. And after her dad died, he became something of a stand-in father for Audrey, and a close friend to her mother.

When my father told me he would be walking Audrey down the aisle at Saint Bartholomew's Church in New York City this summer, all I said was, "August is a bad time for a New York wedding." It wasn't until I opened the invitation that I realized the heat of a New York summer was just an excuse for why I really didn't want to be there. It was my old habit of pushing her away in order to prove how far I'd come since those years, revealing its absurdity in the context of our current lives.

Even my mother will be there sitting on the bride's side of the church this summer. She and my father are both bringing husbands. Despite all my parents have gone through, they call each other every year on their anniversary and can still share a thought across a silent room. I imagine this is what Audrey has with her Parisian fiancé.

I made peace with my father years ago, and relearned how to love the recognition of him in me. But it's only now that I've come to see that neither the man I am, nor the husband and father I want to someday be, could exist without the boy I was with Audrey.

When we were half our age, I smiled at Audrey across a dance floor for all that could be. And this summer at her reception, I will be there to smile at her across the dance floor for *all* that has been. The reply card has sat on my desk for weeks now, so just in case I missed the deadline, *Mr. William Stinson Carter is pleased to accept.*