

Looking Back While Pushing Forward by Rebecca Van Horn

“We’re so old, Becky. Becky, we are so *old*.” This palindromic couplet came from the ex-boyfriend I hadn’t seen in over ten years. We had been in a brief and mildly dysfunctional relationship ten years before that, back when I was twenty and he was thirty. We had remained friends after our breakup and, after a few years absence, regained contact through the contemporary perpetual *This is Your Life*-esque reunion of social media.

Having recently (and after long last) shed much of my personal obsession with being too old for my position in life, I wanted to say, “Speak for yourself, mister.” But I opted for courtesy and good cheer. I looked at his very large belly protruding under a characteristically bizarre and obscure t-shirt in a perfectly round circle, and his mountain-man red beard. He looked a little worn-out and seemed to wheeze a bit, even as he stood in front of me. His face was still youthful, but his body reflected a lifestyle predominantly spent on the couch scarfing down highly caloric takeout after having inhaled a bong hit or two.

Even though we hadn’t laid eyes on each other in ten years, he felt comfortable launching into an immediate and candid rundown of his ailments and tribulations, including (but not limited to) asthma, his slipped disk and the resulting weight gain, his inability to work and the subsequent need to deplete his 401k just to survive, his inability to secure workers’ comp due to “the fucked-up system.” But in spite of all of these injustices from his body, employers and time, he was still game and still smiling. He was, after all, at this show—as was I.

In fact, I had bought the ticket at his suggestion, while we conversed on Facebook late one evening. I hadn’t even known the show was happening, since I had long since stopped reading the three Bay Area-based alternative weeklies, like I’d used to do so religiously back in my teens and twenties. I suppose I had made the unofficial decision awhile back that I wasn’t allowed to go out to things like this anymore. I was too old, too paunchy, too staid, and too broke. I had lost the desire to put together innovative ensembles and to meticulously assemble intriguing and alluring eye makeup—activities which had given me so much satisfaction in the distant past and had, in fact, garnered me praise in the form of strangers stopping me to tell me how much they loved my look. I had long since retreated to the camouflage that I wear on a daily basis, the clothes that say to strangers, “don’t let your eyes settle on me; it makes me uncomfortable. Just move along.”

So, at first, his casual question of if I was going to go see Poptone, which contains members of the seminal and very influential goth bands I’d known and loved two decades ago, seemed a little absurd. I had listened to Bauhaus, Love and Rockets and Tones on Tail a million times, but

usually on other peoples' stereos or on the mix tapes they had made for me. *Of course* I wasn't going; I'm not allowed to do things like that anymore, and those bands had only been on loan to me from ex-boyfriends, anyway. It would be weird for me to listen to their music of my own accord.

Besides, it'd be *way* too much hassle. I'd have to buy a ticket and spend money on parking and the bridge toll, and you know that if I start spending money on things I don't need (like music concerts), I won't have enough left to pay for school. And then once I'd gotten into the city, I'd either circle around for hours looking for parking, or have to spend *another* \$50 (that could have been spent on text books) on a space in a garage. After that, I'd have to *find* the venue and walk in the dark city streets past all the ne'er do wells and hipster bars alike, bars that would be filled with judgmental people who would glower at me as I walked past. And *then* I'd get to the venue and the doorman would be rude to me and *then* the bartender would be rude to me and *then* all the other concertgoers would see that I was the *wrong kind of weirdo* and would shun me openly. It would be just like junior high school and then high school and my subsequent first attempt at college. It would be just like starting work at Macy's. It would be just like everything I'd ever attempted in life, and I'd go home a sorrowful mess to cry into my pillow before drifting off into a fitful sleep.

After running through these uncomfortable and disastrous scenarios in my mind, I bought a ticket. The thought of myself sitting home alone on the night of the show because I had been too afraid was too upsetting to consider for long.

As a way to cope with my anxiety, I constructed a group text to my equivalent of a prayer circle, asking the gals what I should do if I ran into my *other* ex-boyfriend—the one who hurt me terribly in my late teens, and whose abandonment still reverberates through me during vulnerable times. “If you see him, just say, ‘hello;’” “You’ll meet other, more interesting people;” “Just go and enjoy,” were the sensible and sensitive texts I received back in response.

A week or so later, I got into my car, drove to San Francisco, parked my car without incident, walked to the venue without being mugged, handed my ticket to the nice doorman, ordered a ginger ale from the friendly bartender, ran into my ex-boyfriend and his current girlfriend (who gave me a hug), made eye contact with (perfectly friendly and smiling) strangers, swayed to the music and sang along to the lyrics I still knew by heart. Afterwards, I walked to my car (whose windows had not been shattered), got in and drove back home. I was asleep by 1AM. I even made it into my 9AM internship on time the next day—a little tired, but otherwise unscathed.

Those musicians have been such a part of my personal cultural landscape, but always within the context of boyfriends or college friends. I always felt like the bands were on loan to me, like I had borrowed them from certain figures from my past. I had forgotten that they meant great deal to me personally as well. Even though years had passed, I hadn't forgotten how they had helped to narrate major turning points in my life. Going to the show to actually see the people who had created those albums felt like a circle of sorts had closed, that something had ended, leaving space for something else to begin. Even my weekly horoscope column—the one I've

been reading for nigh on twenty years—said that a spell I had been under for a long time was now broken. So sue me, I pay attention to things like that. I'm a Marinnite.

In the two weeks since the show, I've felt a lightness that wasn't there before, and I don't quite understand how one event could change things so subtly yet so much. I've decided that it must be the very act of faith in having gone to the show in the first place and facing the possibility of seeing the people I wouldn't know how to respond to. It seems like an acceptance of possibility in the face of trepidation and uncertainty, which is a skill I'd like to develop further.