

WOODY AND

THE YEAR I WAS 13, MY ONLY friend was a famous man who lived far away, and wrote me letters in plain brown envelopes that I told my mother were from “a girl from camp.” Hiding behind the stacks in my school library, I had written to him in desperation, skipping math. I didn’t like math, or anything else I couldn’t understand, which some days seemed like everything.

I was a precocious, too sensitive girl who felt disliked by all, even my family, which was hardly impressed by my knack for delivering lines from *Antigone* or Barbara Stanwyck movies when asked to do household chores. I escaped into a world of nineteenth-century novels and 1940s movies, after which I styled my clothing: huge thrift-store shoulder pads that stuck out from me like a yoke, and hats—sharp, Mary Astor fedoras that I hid behind. This, according to my high-school yearbook, made me a “Geek/Freak” in sunny Coral Gables, Florida, where girls were supposed to want to be bouncy “Dolphinette” cheerleaders and go to parties where they painted their toenails.

My classmates plucked the hats from my head and threw them across the hallways, amused at my cries of “Halt! Knaves! Infamy!” When I was 13, I sat alone every day in a corner of the lunchroom, furtively scribbling my thoughts to my treasured secret sharer on Fifth Avenue. *He* liked me, I thought, throwing dark looks at whoever had just flung the peas into the brim of my fedora. *He* understood (I was sure we must be alike, with our red hair and quick-witted eccentricity). And *he* was better than all of them. He’d even diagnosed me as a “genius.”

That year, I floated along on pride and wonder at the thought of this, at the exquisite surprise of my pen pal’s identity. His name was Woody Allen.

In 1978, Woody was 42. He had made *Annie Hall* and was at a turning point in his career. He was between Diane Keaton and Mia Farrow; he had no children. In the media’s indulgent eye, he was both an auteur and a sex symbol, a hybrid that was equal parts Jean-Luc Godard, Jerry Lewis, and Job. For a nation of women beset by newly sensitive men, Woody, with his cringing charisma, had become a generational icon. With the great changes overtaking his life (he was writing *Interiors*, his first serious movie), I don’t know how he found the time—and can’t say why he had the inclination—to respond to that first letter I wrote him. In it—God knows why—I carried on as if we had always known each other, and told him how unhappy I was, how bored and full of yearning to do something *meaningful*—whatever it might be.

Dear Nancy,

Hard to believe you’re 13! When I was 13 I couldn’t dress myself, and here you write about one of life’s deepest philosophical problems, i.e., existential boredom. I guess it’s hard for me to imagine a 13-year-old quoting anything but Batman—but T. Mann!?! [Anyway,] there’s too much wrong with the world to ever get too relaxed and happy. The more natural state, and the better one, I think, is one of some anxiety and tension over man’s plight in this mysterious universe. . . .

Next time you write, if you ever do, please list some of the books you’ve enjoyed and movies, and which music you’ve liked, and also the things you dislike and have no patience with. And tell me what kind of place Coral Gables is. And what school do you go to? What hobbies do you have? How old are your parents and what do they do? Or are you a poor family? Do you speak another language? What are your moods like? Do you brood much? Are you energetic? Are you an early riser? Are you “into clothes”? Does the relentless sun and humidity of Florida have an effect on you? At the moment, I am re-filming some parts of my next film which have not come out so good.

Best—Woody.

I was born during a hurricane. Water rushed down the halls of the hospital,



PHOTOGRAPH BY HARRY BENSON



WOODY ALLEN
 Listen Nancy— I can't believe
 you're 13. When I was 13 my interests
 were far deeper than his. I
 wish I could get in a double-headed
 If you're not 13—then you're
 playing a joke on me and I'm a
 helpless at this distance—(and I don't
 know) it's cruel, it's just not
 funny. You're more than
 precious— you're damn clever— and
 very cute. I guess it's hard for me
 to imagine a 13 year old getting anyone
 except Barney— but T. Mann??
 Anyway, there are very few people
 I'd want to have dinner with
 Sandy Bechet is one (his dead) and
 perhaps Jelly Roll Morton (also dead)— and
 Zelda Fitzgerald (son) and maybe
 Babe Ruth and Chekov and Sophocles—
 Charlotte Rampling + Dostoevsky + Tolstoy
 + Kafka + Proust and Yeats and—
 I could go on for a long time. WOODY

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nurses screamed, and at my rather dramatic 13, I took this to be a cosmic warning to the world of my arrival—or perhaps a warning to me of the hostile nature of the world. I'm not sure if I told Woody this in any of the many, many letters I sent. ("Two letters from you in one day!" he once cheerfully exclaimed.) But the young writing student Rain (Juliette Lewis) in *Husbands and Wives* was born during a hurricane too.

Watching Woody's films, as the years go by, I sometimes experience a little jolt of recognition that makes me wonder if I could possibly have had some lasting effect on him, as he so affected me. Since the news of his love affair with Soon-Yi Previn, and the clamor over his breakup with Mia and alleged yen for underage girls, I have listened to all the Woody jokes with discomfort and outrage—because I wonder if they are also, somehow, on me. I prefer to think they aren't. There is a delicate and dangerous line that can be crossed in a relationship between a man and a young girl; but this side of it seems more a cause for celebration than suspicion. At least, that's how I feel about Woody and me.

Dear Nancy,

I am finished with my film [Interiors] and at work on a new (this time funny) script [Manhattan]. I wanted to suggest that you read some books by S. J. Perelman and some essays by Robert Benchley. Both are very funny, and if you enjoyed my books you'll really like theirs. Did you tell me you like jazz music? If so, I'll recommend some records. Don't forget to listen to Mahler's Fourth Sym-

phony (hopefully the Bernstein recording). And of course you're in love with Mozart's 40th Symphony? They are great.

Sartre is a fine writer. I enjoy many of his fictional pieces even more than his nonfiction. Did you read The Wall or The Room? Kierkegaard is the most romantic of the existentialist thinkers. Camus is the best writer. Also, you might enjoy the films The Lady From Shanghai, Mr. and Mrs. Smith, Bombshell. . . . I've been reading too much Carl Jung—a psychoanalyst of dubious merit. I'm blue because the Knicks lost and basketball season is virtually over.

Keep in touch—Woody A.

THE FACE OF SOON-YI PREVIN, IN the famous photo of her holding hands with Woody Allen courtside at a Knicks game, is full of love and awe and romantic expectation, and, I think, a certain magic cast by secrets, and unexpected attention. Her face is full of discovery—a powerful force, potentially a subversive thing. I believe it's valuable no matter how it's attained. The complex need in girls—and in young women, too—for a guide and teacher is something Woody hasn't explored in his work so much as he has his own delight in playing the teacher.

"I'll give you your lesson for today," he tells the *Annie Hall*-ishly dressed, adorable girl who plays his niece in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. "Your lesson is this: 'Don't listen to what your schoolteachers tell you'"—a liberating enough message, with the underlying appeal being "Listen

to me." He tells this to the niece outside a movie theater where he often takes her to watch his favorite old movies. In *Manhattan*, there is some wonderfully affectionate banter between Woody's character and Mariel Hemingway's Tracy as he explains to her the difference between Veronica Lake and Rita Hayworth; watching late-night TV with her, he smiles blissfully when *Grand Illusion* comes on.

I believe he's trying to convey the irresistible satisfaction of a relationship in which rediscovery of the things one loves best is possible, the joy of being able to give someone the gift of experiencing, for the first time, great things. (At the end of *Manhattan* these things become fused with the loved one they are offered to: "Why is life worth living?" Woody's character, Isaac Davis, asks himself into a tape recorder. "Louis Armstrong . . . *Sentimental Education* by Flaubert . . . Those incredible apples and pears by Cézanne . . . Tracy's face.") Rereading Woody's letters, I am touched by his outpouring of recommendations, his repetition of the word *enjoy*. That he wanted me to enjoy the movies and books he loved fills me with gratitude. I did enjoy them; I still do.

I once asked Woody whom he would like to have dinner with, if he could choose anyone in history. "Perhaps Jelly Roll Morton," he replied, "and Zelda Fitzgerald and maybe Babe Ruth and Chekhov and Sophocles and Charlotte Rampling and Dostoevsky and Tolstoy and Kafka and Proust and Yeats and—oh, I could go on for a long time." We had ar-

guments, one rather heated one about Scarlett O'Hara, whom I idolized all out of proportion and whom he considered unworthy—until I wore him down. "I saw *Gone With the Wind* (at first) four times in four days," he wrote. "I was about 17 or 18. I fell in love with Scarlett. She was my dream. She drove me crazy. Then I saw the film years later (I was 30), and I realized what a bitch she was and how I'd grown up regarding my taste in women. . . . Now I'm not so sure."

Every day I raced home from school hoping to find one of the brown envelopes in our mailbox. When there wasn't one, I was despondent, and when there was, I felt a thrill I have not since experienced—except perhaps when getting an unexpected check. Either way, I would spend the afternoons composing and polishing another letter to my mentor. I realize now it was when I first fell in love with writing. Woody encouraged this in me. I think he saw it happening (he was the inspiration), once telling me that something I wrote "read funny." At the time, I couldn't imagine a greater success than making him laugh.

I MET HIM ONLY ONCE—A DAY THAT lives on in the annals of my most misbegotten moments. It was all wrong. I had lost the feather to my fedora. It was raining, a cold, dark, clammy day, and I and my stepmother (who had brought me along on a shopping trip to Manhattan) were trapped in the hospitality of an ultra-Palm Beach female acquaintance who had

recently had a nose job and—like something out of a Woody Allen movie—could talk of nothing else.

I had left him a note, and to my delight—and dread—he had called my hotel ten minutes later asking me over. At the last minute I became panic-stricken at the thought of seeing Woody Allen in person, but the stunned and excited women prodded me on. I knew that an epistolary relationship is fragile, like those delicate ferns that crumple when touched. My knees shaking, I tottered into his penthouse on a pair of too tall Katharine Hepburn sandals, with which, because of the cold, I had been forced to wear socks.

I remember how pale his skin was behind the trademark glasses, how translucent he looked, like a corpse or an angel. When he opened the door, I don't think he knew which one of us I was. (I was as tall as my two companions, who were both barely 30.) Couldn't he tell? My heart sank. "Sit down!" I remember our Gold Coast acquaintance hissing at me, as she smiled and began to inform Woody of her real-estate-raider husband's financial conquests.

"We eat at Elaine's, too," she said.

I fell into Woody's sofa wishing I could silence the woman by feigning vertigo. And he—wearing his very same clothes from *Annie Hall*—sat Indian style in an armchair, much like a 13-year-old, nodding politely, trying to catch my eye. I scowled. I have noticed that in Woody's films he often repeats a line about having your worst fears realized. It had been my worst fear, at 13, that I would lose this improbable friend. And here it was hap-

pening, as if I were watching our letters being shredded by wolves.

What had I imagined? Something, I suppose, very much like the scenario of *Manhattan*—Woody and I taking in art galleries, talking over books and movies. Often discounted in the recent hysteria surrounding adult/child relations are the very real, very romantic fancies entertained by developing girls. Perhaps sometimes girls make too much of them; I think Woody saw that in me the day we met. He had an enormous tray on his coffee table, and I remember a gorgeous array of foods—intensely colored fruits and carefully wrapped candies. It seemed so unlike him, that tray, and yet, in its sumptuous generosity, it seemed to fit. I never got to sample a thing. It was time to go, and I looked into his eyes only at the end of our meeting. "Good-bye," they said sadly.

I T TOOK ME A LONG TIME, IN MY teenage way, to get over him. But when I went away to prep school, on his recommendation, and then on to a college that he had also suggested, I finally met people who were more like me. I made friends. And from time to time, when I felt close enough to one, I would tell him or her about my letters to Woody Allen, and how he wrote back, urging me to read Proust and Kierkegaard, making me feel that I could handle anything. "Your kind of mind and feelings is a prize to have even though you will have to pay a high price for it," he wrote. I never heard from him again. ■

HE LIKED ME. HE UNDERSTOOD (I WAS SURE WE MUST BE ALIKE). HE WAS BETTER THAN **ALL OF THEM**—HE'D EVEN DIAGNOSED ME AS A "GENIUS."



WITH MARIEL HEMINGWAY IN *MANHATTAN* (1979).

