

My Dinner With Afasia (Chicago December 1996)

I was in Chicago to interview Pierre Boulez at Orchestra Hall. It was my third or fourth visit for this purpose and a certain routine had set in. Mind you I was not always successful in obtaining my interview from the maestro. So I do not want you to think I was taking anything routinely, but just enough of a pattern had developed for me to actually enjoy the experience I was living! What an incredible luxury this now seemed to me and how rare it had become in my life.

This was a particularly dark time in my life. In fact, so much of my time since I came back from California had been spent in a great deal of anguish, and yes, why not say it even, discomfort. My car (which I rely on in Ohio to teach) had no heat. I went from prison to prison (where I am an instructor), observing how slightly insane people are who have heat in their cars. How absolutely focused like machines, they become, how they pay no attention to nature or to the cold. I was slipping into an imaginal dialogue if not a waking dream. As little living rooms on wheels, with overweight people, zoomed by me in perfect comfort. Henry Ford's rent slaves said one of my voices...and suffering humanity even in perfect comfort dwindles downwards through the ages, from rock to rock to uncertainty...said the other, voice. They seemed like unconscious machines, feeling nothing yet always somehow dissatisfied. Unhappy, seeking this diversion or that. They always want something, what is it that they want?

I continued at 55, 'the old Rivi' what a fucking contradiction just went through it all; oblivious at that time, with certainty. I felt like a refugee from this world of comfort who has been ejected from those who have heat, as if it is the first time I have glimpsed reality. I thought to myself, was Artaud really on to something after all? Is it possible for an entire civilization to be insane? Or to be insanely comfortable. What does it mean if people do not know it is cold? And if people no longer feel the cold does the planet know its cold? If the planet does not know it is cold, can it tell if it is hot? If the planets thermometer is not functioning, what does that mean? I snapped out of it. Let's get down to business.

Here in Chicago, I had no car to worry about and I was perfectly happy to take the subway everywhere. I had a place to stay at a friends brothers house in old town, with no hotel expenses, my friend had seen to everything. I was rich and even though I could hardly pay my rent back home; never mind... financially, the Alcatraz project I had just worked on was a disaster for me, it had completely fallen apart. The lectures at

San Quentin of six weeks ago had still not paid me. Everything to do with California was problematic for me, "they lose your paperwork" a friend confided to me "so they don't have to pay you on time". The vista of California passed through my mind, its opaque materialism, its dryness, just the opposite of Chicago which seems so wet and full of blood, the last city with human beings in it, I thought.

I was emerging from a very rough patch slowly, very slowly. I had the luxury of travel it's true, and the good fortune to receive unemployment all summer, when I went back to teaching in the fall I actually lived worse than on unemployment.

Here in Chicago I would spend seventy-five dollars, mostly on meals and small expenses incurred by the interview process itself: tape cassettes, batteries, xerox copies (and the like). For the most part I ate at McDonalds, which I hate, although one night I treated myself to a passable meal, chicken dinner at \$6.49, a considerable out lay for food at that time. None of this food was actually congenial to me. When I cook I eat Italian food with wine, and that is that. But what did congeniality or taste have to do with anything? That is how I was.

I have given you the fabric to my little tale, not for any sentimental reasons, but to show the flavor of the character who was walking down Sedgewick Street towards Clark that afternoon. I was infinitely at ease for once, continuing my life inspite of many difficulties in the midst of what seemed like a wonderful adventure and then she appeared from around the corner at first I heard the clickity clack of her steps, she must have worn clogs. She caught my eye, we smiled at each other, and for blocks I had a walking partner, her name was Afasia. She was my age, her face was remarkable, a good looking black woman, her parents came from Cuba, and ravaged by circumstances, she stank, we walked on.

Afasia was trying to get to the other side of Chicago to see her mother. Her house had burned down, her children were in prison, her husband was a drunk, she was cold. I said let's have a cup of coffee. I thought I would ask her some questions about her life over coffee. Her life seemed exactly like the life stories I collect of women in prison where I work. The first coffee shop we came upon I said let's go, and Afasia said "oh, I can't go in there, I stink, no way, not with those people."

Looking at the coffee shop I realized it was rather upscale, but for \$2.00 you could still get a 'regular' cup of coffee. I took Afasia by the arm and said nonsense, you have every right to go (and in any case these are not bad people Afasia) besides the

smell will not even be noticed by these people. You see, they are asleep. If they do notice it, then it will be very good for them to wake up for about two minutes from all this comfort and actually perceive a little reality. You are real, aren't you Afasia?

She responded, "you are one strange fuck, do you know that?" I was impressed because she said this softly. I felt bad suddenly, because I had made her uncomfortable. We turned around and left. We came to the intersection of Sedgewick and Lincoln. Afasia, looked around, people seemed to notice her. I wondered if I was in danger, pimps seemed to peer from alleys everywhere, I said "Afasia lets get a sandwich." I thought of a simple meal with her, I was a little lonely, and we could pass the time.

Nothing could have been further from simple. I never thought ordering a sub and coffee could be such an ordeal. Everytime the counter man tried to make her a sandwich, Afasia stopped him, she had to have it a certain way, a steak philly with cheese. It started with the type of cheese, she wanted orange american cheese, they had only white. That wasn't good enough, she wanted the bun dipped in some dreadful looking juice, the counter man replied, "if I dip it in there the sandwich will go bad". She wanted this, she wanted that, it had to be this way not that. We continued on like this for ten minutes until finally I put a stop to it and said, "you will get a plain steak philly the way it comes or you will get nothing".

She shut up, and looked at me quizically, with a hint of a smile on her face that calmly spoke of admiration towards me. Of course, this puzzled me further until I figured it out. Someone had given her complete attention, she was pretending for a moment she was intimate with someone, just like a real relationship with someone who cared about her, and then my voice had completely taken charge and instead of being upset with me, she was completely calm.

We sat down with our meal, she said thank you. She started to eat and then announced that she stunk. She had to go to the bathroom (there was none). She asked if she could go home with me - just to clean up, she was uncomfortable. Could I help her buy a ticket to see her mother on the other side of Chicago. I told her I had no home in Chicago, I was just visiting, and I was broke. I taught in prisons for a living and was so poorly paid that I could barely make ends meet, all I could do was buy her lunch, and offer her some company. She thanked me.

The rest of the meal passed quietly. Both our minds were racing as we glanced at each other. I thought about her picky

eating habits (she rummaged through the sandwich in front of her, mine was half gone). I thought to myself that the powerless and disenfranchised often displayed great anxiety when it came to food. It was not that she was really picky about her food like rich people for example. But that this incredible anxiety over eating came from being powerless. It was attention she craved, and then only secondly, food. Finally she said, "I'm not hungry at all."

As for what she was thinking about me she moaned, "Rocco, what kind of name is that? Youse ain't in the mafia is you? Man, I had enough of that shit last night. This An-to-ni-o," (she emphasized the name slowly) "offered me \$50 bucks to suck his dick. I told him I don't turn no tricks, my house burned down that's all. That don't mean I turn tricks."

Finally, looking at me seriously, she said that "this was really all new to her. Then softly she whispered as if completely changing the subject, "youse really was nice to me because youse was looking for a prostitute." Disappointed I realized how difficult communication really is, situations determine everything. There was no way out! I turned to her and said "No, Afasia, I don't go with prostitutes." I got up and left, I did not look back.

An hour later I was sitting in Orchestra Hall with my best dressed clothes on, which I had kept concealed under a shabby coat. My seat was a press comp that was so expensive I would have never been able to afford it. How incredible, I thought, how lucky and fortunate I am to have this seat. Apparently the middle aged woman next to me was less than happy with her seat. My leg must have relaxed as it wandered, only a little mind you, into the domain of the seat she occupied. The seats in Orchestra Hall are notoriously small, designed at a time when people were not only physically smaller, but took comfort, even among the wealthy, less for granted than Americans do now.

I had not noticed that the woman on my left was already somewhat oversized for her seat. I must have made her a little more uncomfortable than she already was, absorbed as I was in the peculiarity of Scriabin's Prometheus. Finally, the woman snapped, "move your leg sir, and keep it there." Startled by the command of a person who was used to speaking to people in such a tone my leg remained frozen with maybe the exception of a 16th of an inch either way. Keep it there I did to her obvious annoyance. Amused, I gave the woman no further thought. Instead I thought of little else but of my dinner with Afasia. If she had managed to find her way to her mother on the other side of Chicago. Had she found shelter for the night.

The next day, and for several days after that I looked for her when I was on Sedgewick Street, thinking that maybe she was a regular. The man in the Subway shop had never seen her before and he said he knew all the faces of all the regulars who managed to panhandle enough money to buy a cup of coffee. As I left the sub shop I thought; "I guess it really was all new to her". As I walked down Sedgewick one more time, I thought of her remarkable face. I never saw her again.

Rocco Di Pietro

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