

“I remembered you’re vegetarian, so I made fish,” my boyfriend’s mother said, beaming as she heaped several chunks of the smelliest kind of dead animal onto my plate. She handed the plate to me and I accepted it, smiling courteously. Then I looked down at it with despair. Naked chunks of salmon languished pitifully, their greenish-yellow sweat oozing across the plate. The family had brought out the fine china for me. Everyone else began eating, and I instinctively grabbed my fork. My hands trembled ever so slightly as I laid the cloth napkin across my lap. I picked at the vegetable sides. My boyfriend and his father were thanking her and complimenting the food. A moment later I heard myself chiming in, “These mashed potatoes are great!”

As we ate, the fish weighed on my conscience like a procrastinated homework assignment. Surely the polite thing would be to hold my breath and eat the murdered carcass before me, but that would only mean more fish dinners in the future. I cursed myself. Any reasonable person would have spoken up the moment she went for the fish and said, “Actually, I don’t eat fish,” and then my boyfriend’s mother, a kind and reasonable person, would have said, “Oh dear, I’m sorry, my mistake. Is there anything else I can get you? I think we have a can of black beans in the pantry, would you like that?” and I’d have said, “Sure, I love black beans,” and everything would have been hunky dory. But the idea of speaking up for myself had not occurred to me, and now it was too late. I was in too deep.

“Oh, I’ve forgotten the water pitcher,” she said, standing up and bustling out of the room. Once she was gone, my boyfriend gave a loud sigh. “I’m sorry,” he said, “I didn’t think she would make fish.” I blushed and shrugged. “Here,” his father gestured for me to pass him my plate. I did, and with a few swift strokes of his fork he transferred my salmon onto his plate. No sooner had he passed my plate back to me than my boyfriend’s mother returned, setting the water pitcher beside the crystal centerpiece. As she sat down and replaced her own napkin on her lap, I glanced at my boyfriend’s father. I tried to send him a look that said, “Thank you.” He smiled kindly, an amused twinkle in his eye. I felt overcome with relief. One of them must have spoken to her after that night, because she never made fish for me again.

As I reflect on this happy memory, I recall older, hazier memories of similar moments of subversive love under the regime of my bossy and emotionally explosive mother. Moments when my brother and I looked at each other knowingly, as she claimed it was our fault that she was running late to an appointment. Moments when my father and I silently agreed not to argue with mom when she told us to go run some pointless errand. Saturday nights on my sister’s bed, venting about how unfair it was of mom to drag us to church tomorrow. Of course, these moments are not really a fair characterization of my childhood. They stand out in my memory because they speak to a certain fantasy, a fantasy that shaped me into the kind of person who would rather eat a tiny corpse resembling a beached whale both in its forlornness and its stench than say, “Excuse me, I’d rather not.”

I am what you might call conflict averse. You might think that this means that I deliberately say placating things to avoid conflict. However, there is nothing deliberate about this behavior, and it’s not really about avoiding conflict. Conflict averse people are not particularly good at compromise, negotiation, objectivity, or any of the grown-up skills that truly resolve conflict. Instead, our conflict aversion is about creating the conditions for little rebellions like the one that occurred at that dinner. Conflict averse people unconsciously *want* to be oppressed for a host of reasons, so much so that we will turn our loved ones into oppressors, as I did with my boyfriend’s well-intentioned mother. To understand the kinds of possibilities oppression opens up, we need look no further than my daydreams.

I have been daydreaming about a subversive kind of magic at Hogwarts for a long time. John’s magic (and his name) changed a bit over the years, but the running theme was that he was an atypical magical person trying to pass for a wizard. Wizards were stodgy traditionalists with lots of rules and spell books and things to memorize, while John’s magic was spontaneous, free-spirited, and decidedly more fun. For a while I thought of it as right-hand and left-hand magic, but then I discovered chaos magic and that seemed to fit him better. In my daydreams, the stodgy, traditional wizards can’t handle the truth, and regard other forms of magic as an abomination to be stamped out. With the oppression

comes an element of danger, the risk of the subversive magician being discovered. This premise is, if I do say so myself, a perfect analogy for how I feel going through life. It's certainly how I felt as a kid, when I believed I couldn't express my own opinions openly. Today, I still feel an unconscious imperative to go with the flow, to pretend to be what the authorities want me to be. Don't rock the boat. One wrong move and my disloyalty will be discovered, and I'll be thrown overboard.

In my daydreams, John sometimes makes contact with other people who are also oppressed by the wizarding community. We see this clearly in his first meeting with Kate/Flaed/Cleopatra. He is immediately smitten with her, not because of anything she does or says, but simply because she is a freak like him. The moment when they reveal their undead alter-egos to each other, a special intimacy emerges between them, or at least that's how John perceives it. He has been alone in the world for so long, wishing there were someone else who understood him. Suddenly he finds such a person, a fellow subversive, and he is over the moon about it.

Conflict aversion is about creating opportunities for subversive, secretive love. In my imagination, love thrives under oppression. Oppression makes possible that moment of connecting with another rebel. This is not the only reward of my self-imposed oppression, but this fantasy of "subversive intimacy" is a major driver of it. If I had been honest with my boyfriend's mother about the fish, then there would have been no oppression and no opportunity for that moment of subversive intimacy with my boyfriend and his father.

No wonder I stay the course even after things have soured. Hanging onto an annoying friend gives me the chance to complain about her to other friends, and I can find solidarity among those who commiserate with me. Staying in a crummy job gives me the chance to sniff out colleagues who also hate the job, and we can trade horror stories over beers like brothers-in-arms. Staying with an oppressive boyfriend makes possible a certain love between heterosexual women, a love that spills out as we paint our nails and do face masques complain that men are so immature, ya know?

John has been thoroughly rejected by wizarding society, so he must hide his secret loathing for it. To avoid conflict is to create an oppressor, because the resentment is still there, it's just going underground. What kind of person would rather be oppressed than stand up for themselves? In part, it comes from the view that love, truth, beauty and goodness are fragile. If you believe that love would be attacked and destroyed if it were made known, then this behavior makes sense. If you believe that love can only exist in the shadows, then you will seek out shadows. If need be, you will even see shadows where there are none.

This is an important dynamic that's worth a deeper dive. Conflict averse people believe that honesty will be punished, which makes us afraid to tell the truth, so when our truth is finally discovered people are annoyed that we didn't speak up sooner, which reinforces the view that honesty will be punished. Our cowardice is a *strategic fear* that reinforces a particular worldview. The same goes for our love. Both my fear of confrontation and my relief in subversive intimacy reinforce the view that love, truth, and beauty can only exist in the shadow of oppression, a fantasy that deep down I secretly relish.

Let's demonstrate this with the example with the fish. As I've already said, here's how a normal person would have handled that situation:

Me: "Actually, I don't eat fish."

Mom: "Oh dear, I'm sorry, my mistake. Is there anything else I can get you? I think we have a can of black beans in the pantry, would you like that?"

Me: "Sure, I love black beans."

The end. But I am afraid that honesty will be punished, so at the moment that my boyfriend's mother began piling chunks of murder onto my plate, this scenario flashed through my mind:

Me: "Actually, I don't eat fish."

Mom: "What? Why not? What's wrong with you? Well, now dinner is ruined and I feel inadequate and it's all your fault."

And boom, my truth shrivels up like a vampire in the sun. So I kept my silence, terrified of being mocked or blamed for being a vegetarian. I accepted the plate of “food”. From that moment on, I could not reveal my truth without it being kind of weird. I would feel compelled to give some explanation for why I didn’t immediately admit that I don’t eat fish. Anyone would have felt a little silly. I would have felt absolutely mortified. I would have perceived the moment as a painful retaliation, a direct punishment for confessing the truth. If she had responded with, “Oh dear, why didn’t you say so?” her question would have cut into me like a knife.

Here’s the crazy part: even if she said nothing remotely retaliatory, I would have *still* interpreted the aftermath of my honesty as a retaliation. Even if the first scenario had occurred, I’d have felt chagrined as she bustled around for the black beans, every little grunt a confirmation that she was burdened by the unreasonableness of my request. As my boyfriend and his father waited for her to prepare the beans, I’d have felt them staring daggers at me. Their patient silence would have sounded like a resentful one, and heaven help me if someone began tapping a foot or a finger, as I’d have seen this as a pointed condemnation. I’d turn them all into oppressors. Even if they’d *all* chimed in and said kind, supportive things, I’d *still* have seen them all as oppressors, because I simply cannot believe that we could all love and support each other openly for any meaningful length of time. I’d be looking for a catch. I’d sooner assume they were all lying to me than believe that everything was genuinely fine. The only way I could trust any of them was if *some* of them had been on my side, and had remained so secretly.

The scenario as it actually occurred illustrates the rewards of perceiving oppression and acting with cowardice. As it actually occurred, I had a delightful moment with my boyfriend and his father. We were comrades in the resistance, and remained so for the rest of the night. Our oppressor, mom, was none the wiser, and so our conspiracy was a success. Subversive intimacy flourished.

Think of a conflict averse person in your life. Isn’t it true that they can be cowardly? Isn’t it true that they would probably rather misrepresent their feelings than reveal them, let alone defend them? Are they inexplicably attracted to people they resent, or to a job that wears them down? Have you ever wondered why? Conflict averse people are not especially crazy and we do not have bad intentions. (Don’t forget that you, too, have fantasies that you unconsciously guard with savage ferocity.) It’s just that our fantasy of love is different from yours. To us, love is a conspiracy, a camaraderie among rebels in the trenches. If you’re not with Us, then you’re with Them. And if it’s just the two of us alone together, then sorry babe, but that makes you automatically Them, because there always has to be a Them.

We would do well to be wary of simplistic labels like “conflict averse”. A behavior that shows up again and again in our lives is rarely about getting one thing or avoiding one thing. This is one reason that boiling people down to symptoms and diagnoses falls short as a theoretical framework. Usually, one repeat behavior is related to *all* our other repeat behaviors. Our behaviors are better described by rich fantasies with many moving, mutually supportive parts. We are each of us unconsciously desperate to create concordance between our lived experience and a set of fantasies wherein love is attainable and failure to attain it is explicable. My analysis here is simplistic. But we must start somewhere. And there is no better starting point than one’s own imagination.