

Sheila O'Neel: To want to know another person is an act heroism, for it requires an overcoming of one's self to chisel into the putrid, slime-doused, dark places of another person and still hope that you will love them after your hammering and probing has revealed the ugliness, all the fossils of stupidity, ignorance, and embarrassments that leave their imprints on one's soul. I do not say it requires courage to reveal such things, for it is a relief to do so. One wants to purge one's dirty little secrets. Heroism, that is not. But to dive into the murk, to spelunk into the sweaty, stinky cave of another person's soul – if that is not a feat of courage, I do not know what is.

For what are you going to find but things you never wanted to know? That she inserted a tube of tooth paste into her lover's anus? And squeezed? That she was molested by her uncle's horse? That the pain of a broken relationship lingers to this day in her heart, that if she could do it over again, she would, except it would be different so that it worked, but it didn't, and time is irreversible and she has moved on to where she can build another relationship that might be less passionate but more enduring, for the only thing she learned was that the sizzle of passion explodes, but the hotness remains a smoldering, never-to-be extinguished love that just, for whatever reason, could not be?

It is a truism that in a relationship which leaves a welt (welcome or not), you will be one of two things: you will be the object of your lover's raging passion, and therefore the accomplice to a savage but doomed affair, or you will be the mild-mannered doe with whom she can build a less torrid, less combustible, but more enduring relationship.

I, of course, always find myself in the less combustible category, and I will admit that it presents a great void in my being; for in everyone's heart, they would prefer to be the torch that scorched but went out, than the candle that kindled and stayed aflame.

Oh, how I long to be that supernova of someone's pain!

But love demands ferocity of curiosity, a need to know, to delve into the dank, fetid places of someone else, and the supreme, ironic beauty of life, or one of them, is that you end up loving more as a result of your unpleasant explorations. It as though you are rewarded for your pain by deepening your love. And what, in the end, do we want more than that?

Thus was my mindset when I escorted Martini Galore to dinner.

It may be observed that the path of submission is often the path of the righteous, for many vital decisions are ready-made if we simply do what we must and object to our baser nature's urge to try to control with sweaty greed.

In other words, I knew what was required of me.

"So," I said, when the napkin was draped across her lap, "what exactly is your deal?"

I do not know what amuses me more: human nature or the nature of coyness, for she acted as though she didn't know what I meant.

"What I mean is this. After you decide what you want to eat, you must expunge yourself of all the things you hoped I would never find out, so that we can get them out of the way. In doing so, the liberty and canniness, not to mention the audacity with which you speak, as well as the fear and humiliation that you will undoubtedly repress, but which I will discern through some physical symptom, whether it is the slight quiver of your eyelash, how you scrunch your hand under your butt to prevent it from fidgeting, or whether there is a subtle red rash just under your perfectly combed hair, all of these elements by which you will reveal yourself will have the net result of endearing yourself to me even quicker, harder, and with more suction than we both thought possible, and will quicken a process whose conclusion we both know, I am sure, in our hearts. On with it. Tell me the things I don't want to know. I want to know them. But determine what you want to order first, for I am very fond of *The Black Roux*, and if you embarrass me by a lack of finesse or indecisiveness in ordering, I may not be able to forgive the transgressions you are about to hurl at me like knives, ice balls, and strips of flame shot from your heart's flame thrower which no doubt has an instinct to incinerate everything that tries to touch it."

The little strumpet shot me a hot little smile, with wide quick eyes, as if to say, "So this is the way you play?"

Yes, my cagy feline, this is the way I play.

"Fine," she said, "I'll tell you the things you don't want to know. Let me figure out what I want and then we'll get down to business."

"Enough," I said, "trust my knowledge of the menu and chef. I will order for both of us. Now, out with your skeletons."

She laid the menu on the table as though it were a page from DaVinci's journals. Her lips pursed, she pressed her pink-painted finger to the creases and tapped a few times, as though tallying a mental tablet of sins and vices to lay out buffet-style for my consumption.

"The first thing you should know," she said, to which I countered with, "Yes?"

"Is that I am with another."

I considered being dismissive, pointing out that I would trump any peon, that she may be with another but she is with me now, but something inherent and invisible instructed me to take a more delicate approach to her heart. So I said, "Oh yes? When do you plan to terminate this – I hesitate to call it relationship lest I give undue credence to the terms of your – affiliation. Is it strictly a matter of fornication?"

"You are direct."

"Get to the point. What? Yes, thank you," I said to the waitress, "I will have the lemongrass mackerel and the lady will have the plum rabbit. There is no need to tell me they are excellent choices. I already know, and I know that you are an excellent server. Thank you. Now," I said, turning to Martini, "hold nothing back."

When you listen to another person reveal the things they would rather keep hidden, it is like prying into a locked jewelry box and rooting through their love letters, their snapshots of smiles and held hands, of comical expressions of tongues stuck out to the camera, of, in short, happiness and passion without you. I do not know about others, but I find it painful and, indeed, impossible to accept that happiness and love with a beloved could precede my presence in her life. Perhaps that is a solipsistic attitude, but if truth be a mere solipsism, so be it. The fact of the matter is that, if you are special enough for someone to develop a special relationship with, one rooted in love, then it is a reasonable expectation that what you encounter with that person will trump what she experiences with your predecessors, making the happiness and fun she had before your arrival seem trivial and less real. One's goal in a relationship is to cultivate that realness of happiness and love, to conquer what had come before so thoroughly that it renders everything prior a mere phantom of what was to come, what, in short, you are able to deliver.

When she told me the man she "was with" led a tortured, divided life, I had to laugh. "He must be an artist," I said. But he was no artist. I was informed that he was a powerful man in the community, one who had great responsibility and visibility but of late had become more consumed by a fire to pursue what he believed was his true calling. I was intrigued by her intrigue, because, by her looks, she looked as though she was someone who fell for appearance primarily – I imagined a man from an Abercrombie ad with long, perfectly disordered hair, a cowboy shirt opened two buttons too many – and that dimension, complexity, and depth were not only afterthoughts, but obstacles to her satisfaction. So it was with some surprise that I found myself conceding, "Your man reminds me a little bit of my man."

What did I say?

Yes, reader, I did say that. Sometimes your mouth ejects things it should not, things that bear no relation to the truth, things that the inanity of your unconsciousness clings to its stupid juvenile breast as though it needed to suckle the baby in secret, concealed, as it were, beneath the layers of clothing.

She asked me what I meant.

"Do not try to misdirect this conversation," I said, "tell me more about this duplicitous man."

But she would have none of it, and I will admit with some pride that she backed me into a corner that I did not mind being in with her.

"Take my hand," I said. She squeezed it next to the saucer of softening butter.

Our drinks arrived, and when my cherry-colored liquid was warming my stomach, I found myself blurting the things about Victor Hoon that I had been concealing.

"He is such a stupid buffoon that I don't have the heart to evict him from my life, even though he has only recently entered. He is like a lost monkey that has wandered his way into the den of a lioness. And yet ..."

We shall skip over the next hour of conversation because it does not serve our purposes. Let us resume, oh, let me see, we shall resume here:

"There is only one thing that I have ever or will ever despair over. There is only one thing worthy of despair," I announced.

"Which is?"

"That art, no matter how much life is given to it, regardless of the passion and sacrifice, the 'agony and the sweat,' as Faulkner calls it, will never equal life. That it will never come alive. The point is not just to create. Any teenager can create when they copulate without birth control."

"Then what is the point?"

"The point is to transform your mind into a point with which you poke, push, provoke – obliterate. The point is with the weapon of your imagination to infiltrate the most restricted zones of life, to crawl beneath the miles of barbed wire, to sneak through the snaking ventilation systems, to become a vapor in order to slide through the slices of doorways so that you can see what is behind, what is beyond, to report back what you have observed that others have not. An artist is nothing less than an explorer, an adventurer, a survivalist with the ability of a songbird to sing. One of the many problems today is that 95 percent of the 'artistes' have no capacity for the pain and anguish, they have no toughness to endure the journey. Their minds are whittled shells. What they have in mind is the portrait of poor old George Washington on a green rectangle that they wish to multiply without any idea of what good it will do."

Needless to say, I presented my own fears and convictions with fervor, verve, and thrust, and I proceeded to learn many despicable things about Martini Galore. Yet those despicable things were the very algae for the scum-eating tadpoles of my heart. How is such a thing possible? That the very things that should most repel you from another are the very ones that draw you nearer, that endear you closer, tighter, more delightfully to another? By the end of her veritable scroll of infirmaries against the soul I sat exhausted, my heart palpitating, asking for another drink when at last we had finished our food and ordered desserts.

"Yes," I said, "I would like hand-whipped cream on top of the triple chocolate cake."

I was about to ask if we would need two spoons when I sensed a most noxious presence, and my foreboding was confirmed when I looked at my companion, who was looking over my shoulder. I turned around and my stomach sank to my ankles. Then I quickly, valiantly regained myself and conducted the situation like a ring leader of a circus.

"Anne," I said to our table's visitor, "you are most unexpected. You materialize like a specter."

The lass stood there so pitifully, so dumpishly, like one of those dwarves from Snow White, with her block-shaped glasses and her rather alien-shaped face, with its large, wide eyes and extraordinarily circular cheeks, that I had no choice but to feel pity for her.

"Let me introduce you two," I said.

"Let me tell you a thing," Anne said. It was as though she was locked onto me and would never let go until she had said her peace. I was tempted to shatter a plate across her skull and be done with the unpleasant situation, but my merciful side took over and I realized that this was life, this was a full-blown, visible cold sore episode of life itself, and when these moments come along, which is rare, one should not resist, but should savor every drop.

As you will recall, Anne was the rather unfortunate creature that I chose to make an example of to Victor. She had served my purpose and I was through with her. I thought I had made that clear to her. As for Victor, he needed anything by which to be duped, even if it necessitated the duping of myself.

"You don't just barge into someone's life and tell them you're going to be their servant of love, and they're going to be your slave of harbor."

"Ardor," I clarified, "slave of ardor. Slave of harbor makes no sense."

"You said slave of harbor. I thought I was your slave of harbor all this time."

"You have been misled on each account," I said. "It is over, Anne. Our affair did not have the quality of cement that hardens when it dries."

"You said that love is an act of the will. You told me this in bed when we were naked, when you pulled out that gigantic thing."

"We can leave some things to the imagination," I said, rising from my seat and taking her by the arm.

"Get off me," the wench demanded, "you enslaved me to your heart. Now I'm like a mad dog chained there, and I'm not going away. I'm going to bark all night."

"We do not need to get melodramatic."

All the time my companion sat serenely at the table practically engulfing the scene with her perfect pacific eyes, as though enraptured and yet distant, disconnected, with the knowledge that what we had already established between us was like something that ran deep into the lava of the world. I looked over at her and our eyes met, and she blinked slowly, with depth, as if to tell me, yes, lover, I understand the situation, and though it is unpleasant, it is yours, and therefore I clutch it to my breast.

Then Martini spoke.

"Who is this little whore?"

Before I could take action, Martini had bolted from her seat, clawed the arm of Anne, and, escorting her away, I could hear her say, "It's time to let go. It's time to leave. If you come back I'm going to ..."

I could hear no more. Anne had disappeared. Martini had reemerged. Our dessert arrived, and we ate together, feeding each other spoons of triple chocolate with hand-whipped cream.

It is no exaggeration to say that when we left *The Black Roux*, we were in love.