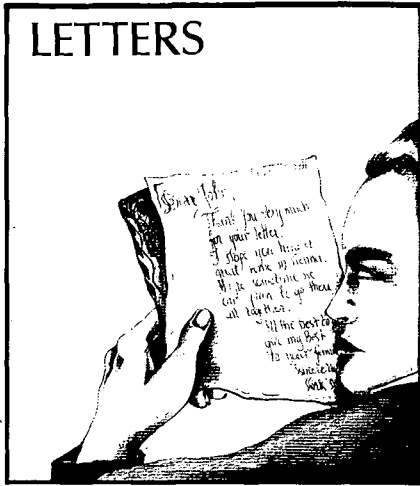


LETTERS



The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name

by Stephen Proizer

"Snap out of it, they're only a pair of pants. . . . That's what I keep telling myself. Actually, they're a pair of linen pleated trousers I bought at Louis last spring. Little did I know what I was getting in for. The more I wear them, the more I love them, the more I wear them. And it's not as if they're my only pair of pants. But when I go to get dressed, it's like I don't have anything else in my closet."

—an advertisement for Louis clothing store in the *Boston Globe*

Thirty-one days in hell; lost my girl, my job, my apartment; on the nod, drinking Old Crow out of the bag. An old Army buddy in Men's Haberdashery sneaked me into the boiler room at Saks, where I sleep on a flea-bitten cot and sweat from the heat, but it's all scum like me deserves; a guy who'd give it all up for—a stinking pair of pants.

When I think about the first time I saw those babies—laying on top of the 34-inch waist pile, their fresh flaxen smell curling up into the air like a spring morning that had sex written all over

it—they almost looked like they were ready to leap off the counter and pull themselves up over my tasseled loafers. I hesitated to even touch them, for fear I would mar their perfection, but when I finally dared to lift them up, they sprang to life beneath my touch and, at that moment, we began to breathe as one.

In a kind of trance, I brought them to the dressing room, but I had no doubt that they would wrap my body as no one, or, rather, nothing ever had. I looked at my old pants with disgust; sure, they were 100 percent wool, but so what? Wearing them now made me feel like a vegetarian buried in a pile of pork rinds. They had become contemptible and vile and I knew they were headed for the Goodwill pile, where all unclean things end up.

I shed them quickly and when I slipped my legs slowly into the new object of my affection, I knew how Mario Andretti must feel sliding into a highly strung Ferrari—"Be careful," she will purr to you, "I can be dangerous. But if you treat me right, I'll give you the ride of your life."

The waist and length were perfect and no anticlimactic alterations necessary. The line, as it fell over my hips, was careless and subtle, like Brancusi's birds. The cuffs broke exactly at the shoe top and I knew instinctively that when I sat, they would rise to reveal a perfect three inches of imported beige silk stocking.

In an exalted state, the most important events of my life flashed through my mind—my first pair of wing tips, my graduation from the Young Men's Department, my first cummerbund. Tragic memories, too, rose up from my unconscious—beloved argyle socks lost, cashmere sweaters clumsily snagged, white bucks negligently scuffed. A wave of guilt overcame me.

"God, I am unworthy!" I cried and started hastily unzipping the fly. But just then, I heard a voice, which was coming from somewhere near the double-sewed crotch: "We are bound together forever," it said, and I knew it had to be so.

Our first appearance was an immediate sensation: when we entered the bar

at the Ritz, a hush fell over the hors d'oeuvres table. Half the crowd burst into applause and the other half ran to telephones to scream at their tailors. At that moment, we had it all. We were Tristram and Isolde, F. Scott and Zelda, all tied together in one neat bundle. Every Gibson I drank was as clean and dry as the Sahara; every bon mot shone like the spire on the Chrysler Building. That night, all was heaven.

The second evening, we still made an impact, but the keen edge was slightly dulled. I heard a stray comment about my wardrobe getting repetitious, and the bartender put only two onions in my Gibson. Having worn the pants since I bought them the day before, they didn't drape quite as well, but the crease was still as sharp as aged Roquefort.

The next day at work, my secretary began shooting meaningful glances at my legs. I glared back at her but knew what she was trying to say. I had now had Them on continuously for 72 hours, but refused to admit that anything out of the ordinary was going on.

That night, I saw my fiancée, Rowena. Madly in love as we were, neither of us thought much about my pants. We progressed through a candlelight dinner and kissed passionately by the fireside. We both began to disrobe, but when I tried to take Them off, some powerful force stayed my hand. "It's me or her," it said and I was powerless to disobey. I pleaded with Rowena to give me time to figure out the situation, but she was adamant.

"Lookit, bud, I'm not interested in a *ménage à trois*. I hope you and your trousers will be very happy. I'd suggest you go to Hong Kong for your honeymoon and have them make you up a couple pairs of cheap in-laws."

Things spiraled down faster and faster from that point. First, the pleats started to sag, then the crease began to lose its keen edge. Gin and coffee stains mottled the beautiful crème color until I became too embarrassed to show up at work. Every day, I saw my pants degenerate a little more and my life with it. I lost my job and was barred from the Ritz. I took to drinking in

sleazy bars; joints where they wouldn't know linen from gabardine and eventually, even they wouldn't let me in. The only way to stop the downward spiral was to dry-clean, but I couldn't let those butchers get their hands on my pants.

I let it all slip away and now, here we lay in tatters. But if you think either of us regrets an instant of it, you're wrong. We may have taken a few years off each other's lives, but we've experienced a depth of passion that few ever will. And when we go—defiantly locked in each other's embrace—perhaps our passing will inspire others to proclaim their forbidden love, and finally come out of the closet.

*Stephen Provizer writes from
Cambridge, Massachusetts.*



Anna Mycek-Wodnicki

Noni

by Clinton W. Trowbridge

“**W**hew-whew! Whew-Whew!” I looked past my mother through the half open taxi window. An old man in a grey flecked, tweed jacket was walking a Scotch terrier on a leash. With much effort she cranked the window down another turn and stuck her head out. “Whew-whew!” she whistled again. The man turned, surprised, though not displeased, and then the taxi lurched forward and my mother slumped back into her seat. “What a

hunk!” she said, and let out a momentous groan. I laughed, but she did not respond. She sank more deeply into her seat, her face turned away.

Eighty-three, and weighing no more than that, she was still capable of such surprises. My sister, Katharine, had called the previous week to tell me that “Noni,” as we called her now, had—with tears in her eyes and all the frustration of a teenager—fought with her for half an hour about wanting to marry Bob, her 41-year-old physical therapist. “Why shouldn’t I?” she’d complained over and over again. “We’re both free.” Recently divorced, her therapist was known to us all for his good looks—the picture on her dresser showed a smiling, wavy-haired Perry Como—for his magic fingers, and for the jokes he told her twice a week, repeated to us as regularly as news bulletins. “Good,” I’d said to Katharine. “Keeps her young.” But I didn’t have to deal with her except on the phone. To me it was just another funny story. My wife and I lived fifty miles away, out on Long Island, and got into New York only occasionally. My sister, in Chappaqua, saw our mother several times each week. My younger brother, Gus, lived with his family only 13 blocks away. More detached, I could enjoy being surprised.

We drove on another few blocks in silence, and then she turned toward me and I saw her tears. “Why shouldn’t I get married again,” she said, her face twisted in misery.

“Mother!” I found myself saying, shocked by the nakedness of her emotion.

“Why shouldn’t I?” she cried out again. “We’re both free!”

* * *

My father had died just over nine years before, in 1976, at the age of 79. They had been living at the Amsterdam House, a posh “care facility” with an across-the-street view of St. John the Divine, elegant paintings in the foyer, elaborate wooden puzzles spread out temptingly on card tables, and biweekly sing-alongs. They’d wanted to go home to their apartment on 68th Street the day they’d arrived, but to please us and the doctors, they’d stayed three months—as long as they could. “I don’t give him two weeks,” the doctor told me when at last we agreed to let them go

home. My mother had originally gone to be with my father, but the doctors tried to keep her there for psychiatric treatment at the end. She insulted them daily, corrected their grammar—as she always did everyone’s—and could not refrain from telling them to their faces how stupid she thought them. My father, who had been an Episcopalian minister for 51 years, died six weeks later, peacefully, with a smile on his lips. A week before my mother remarked quite casually that he’d lost his belief in the life hereafter. “How do you know that?” I’d said, shocked.

“He told me so. Yesterday.” She said it just as she said everything else—as if she were reading it aloud from the *New York Times*. It was only later that it occurred to me that she’d probably made it up. Some six months after that she had no memory of having said it, so I will never know whether my father’s almost saintly serenity at the end was based on his sure hope of eternal bliss or on an acceptance of death as nothingness. His life had certainly not been serene, neither within nor outside the bosom of the family—he and my mother having rather famously and vociferously fought for most of their lives—and his ministry had been passionate but frustrating. Why did my mother tell me that about him, if it were not true? Or why, without amplification, if it were? Why didn’t I press her? Why did I not question my father? Why?

My brother is the founder and head of the Manhattan Country School. He has suffered more than the rest of us, probably, from my mother’s delusions. A few years ago when she called to tell us that her good friend so-and-so had just given Gus’s school one million dollars, we bubbled with excitement. But Gus’s voice sounded weary when I spoke to him on the phone. He’d called the woman in question, hopeful yet suspicious. “No,” she’d said, “I wish I could afford to. Poor Jean.”

My mother should have been an actress. That was part of it. We all said that. She had such a capacity for making the unreal real. And for a brief moment she had been an actress, three years before that million-dollar delusory remark. As a result of a chance encounter between a granddaughter and Woody Allen’s talent scout, Noni had made a cameo appearance in the