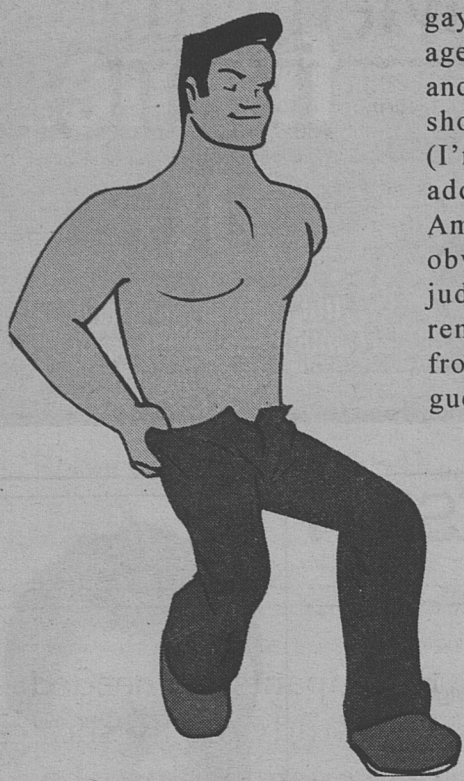


From Meat to Carrion: Which are You?



BY VINCENT DOWNING

For my 29th birthday, I got violently ill 11 days beforehand. I was diagnosed with a "viral arthritis" and spent about two weeks doddering on sore ankles. I briefly had to use a cane. For my 30th birthday, I was awake at the time that my birth certificate said I'd been born and was seized with violent chills and a fever at that very minute. I spent three days in bed. The last birthday I actually enjoyed was my 27th, with a solid three years cushion between me and having my youth ripped from me in the space of a moment. The last birthday I in any way celebrated my 28th. That was 11 birthdays ago. I was 39 this year.

The only time I've ever had a problem sustaining an erection was at the age of 31. Somehow I wound up in bed with a sweet, charming fellow of 39. I remember thinking "39-this is the best I can do?" My fear and revulsion of somebody else's age rendered me impotent. Somehow, without seeing it at all, I'd become something other than a mere bisexual: a fetishist. Somebody unable to function sexually without the presence of a very specific thing like a shoe of a certain color. Of course my fetish was and is for something common therefore acceptable: youth.

It seems natural to fear the aging process. It diminishes us physically and often mentally as well. American culture is — I've been told — unusually age averse. Gay male American

culture is worse. A gay man is middle aged at 35, old by 45 and virtually invisible shortly thereafter. (I'm not going to address lesbian American culture for obvious reasons but judging from the remarks I've heard from lesbians my wild guess is that the wimmin are as well trained to despise the aging process as we men are. For example, I've heard at least one lesbian in her fifties say that the age discrimina-

tion she finds in the lesbian community to be worse than the homophobia she's found in the society at large.) The difficulty we run into with our feelings towards the aging process is the same difficulty that Christians run into with their moral judgments: how many people do you think can actually hate the sin and love the sinner?

What set me off on this is that I'd recently borrowed a lot of books from the R.U.1.2? library. Ten or twelve collections of erotica, short stories and four novels. Out of the dozens of stories I read in the space of a month there was just one that expressed anything other than bald (pun unintended?) contempt and revulsion for men in their forties or older. There was a handful of stories from the point of view of men in their forties. Every one of these emphasized yearning for lost youth. Even more interesting is that I didn't read a single story from the point of view of any men older than this. If they were depicted at all, it was as flabby loveless predators yearning only for the young and usually making unwanted advances towards some young protagonist in some tearoom, rest stop, or locker room. Seen through the eyes of these authors they are as outcast and unclean as biblical lepers. I don't see this kind of relentlessly unapologetic hatred against any other group in gay male literature, with the possible exception of the religious fundamentalists.

The most frightening thing about this to me is

that I have all these feelings myself. The three times I've bedded with men considerably older than myself were deliberate forays into unknown territory rather than lovemaking or even just getting off. With one exception I never even considered seeing them again other than as "friends." All three of them were interesting, accomplished, charming men who would have had a great deal to contribute. But that just didn't matter. I was just too afraid. Part of what I fear is a loss of status among the only people whose opinions count: those in their 20s and 30s. Part of it is that its like aging is a disease and I don't want to be around anyone I can catch it from. Part of it is that my attitude is plenty of time to have sex with the old and ugly when I'm old and ugly myself and nobody worthwhile will have anything to do with me.

Now in all fairness to our collective panic about getting older, most of the middle aged and old don't seem to me to have gained much of anything. Generally, you learn a few tricks, gain a bit of perspective, have a bit more money than when you were young. But unless you keep yourself agile with physical and mental exercise, and flexible by forcing yourself to do new things, the only feature you seem guaranteed to gain is the tendency to rot.

I have my opinion as to which the majority of us wind down doing. It really does seem to me that most of us no longer young are essentially the same goods we were 20 or 30 years ago except that now we sag, bag, and lag.

But this is what there is. And hearing people in their early 20s voicing their fears about a birthday they just had is a symptom of something very very bad. Something certainly as bad as aging physically and probably worse since it begins to afflict you far sooner than the afflictions of growing older. Sometimes it seems as if what we fear more than anything else is social: being devalued and dehumanized. This is chilling when you consider the fear of the inevitable decline of our bodies and how vast this is.

What I hadn't understood

— not really — as I ever more anxiously watched the countdown of birthdays during my twenties is how I was devaluing myself. Oh, if somebody had pointed it out to me I would have agreed with them. But all I really knew was that I was afraid. And that it was going to be harder and harder to find anybody worthwhile (read: young) to be with the older I got.

Strictly speaking I don't consider my attitudes as just ageism but also a symptom of my addiction to a certain kind of physical beauty. My beauty addiction is as unforgiving and unrealistic as regards the young as anybody else. If they're not athletic looking or at least slim, I dismiss them as prospective partners regardless of any other merits they may have. Where choosing a friend or a co-worker or accomplice of any kind is considered — for me age or appearance is not much of a factor. It's just when I'm looking at folks from the perspective of a sexual partner that I'm almost a complete prisoner of these feelings. I'd rather have partners — male or female — who are around my age. It's just that as the age group gets older, there are even fewer people who look sexy. It's as if how people feel, taste, smell, and sound don't matter at all. Its as if sex were only visual.

Addiction is specific.

I don't use the word addiction lightly. It took years to recognize the similarity between my single minded pursuit of my type and my single minded devotion to smoking cigarettes. I enter a bar looking for a prettyboy with the same unhappy intensity that I do entering a store looking for my brand of cigarettes. It just so happens that my type is exactly what they've been selling us for years in the ads in Gay magazines: buff smooth young mesomorphs. Quite the coincidence don't you think?

What confuses this whole issue of aging and sexiness for me is that I do believe the preference for youth in a partner is borne from the logic of reproduction. Youth = fertility & virility. In

addition youth in a reproductive partner means they are more likely to survive the years necessary to raise children. It makes sense that generally what members of our species will find sexy are signs of youth and health. No, I'm not saying that this is universal, and I'm not saying that it is impossible to learn the attractions of anything else. I'm just saying that we can't blame the media and leave it at that.

But I do have the sense that the media is, with our acquiescence, exaggerating this natural tendency. Now on steroids, our instincts are swollen into attitudes that pollute a whole range of pleasurable activities that are anatomically and psychologically related to reproduction, but have nothing directly to do with it at all. As I'm fond of quipping: Well of course gay men prefer young partners. Eggs age! (Women are born with all the eggs their bodies will ever produce.)

Nobody wins. I've looked at my young smooth mesomorphs and have been blind to who they were. Unless they possessed truly extraordinary qualities — bad or good — I just didn't care. I was dazzled by their bodies. At such moments somebody is not a person. And I can remember when I was in my twenties and some old guy (just about anyone more than five maybe ten years older than me) would try to strike up a conversation and I'd escape as soon as I could, stiffening at any touch, careful not to smile. The possibility never even occurred to me that these creatures could have any other motive in approaching me other than sexual. And if I'd have thought there was, it wouldn't have mattered. I don't know what to label this state of affairs, but the idea

