Sex Talks to Girls

Seaton, Maureen

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Mars built a loft “bedroom” for Sophie in one corner of our studio apartment on Netherland Avenue. It was the size of a twin bed, had shelves and a ladder, and Sophie came on weekends to the Bronx from her father’s in Westchester County to stay with her dyke mom and her mom’s new partner, who she called her steppfather. When Sophie was aloft in her bed you could only see the top of her head peeking out. She’d be listening to her Walkman or reading a book for school and Mars would be cleaning and straightening and I’d be cooking breakfast and we three felt cozy and close and happy.

Mom, Sophie said one day, sipping peppermint tea at the tiny table in front of the window that looked out over Route 9, I want to live with you and Mars full time. I’m going to be a sophomore next year—that’s when Clio got to do it—and I’m coming, no matter how poor we are—I don’t care. Anyway, she added, I feel richer with you
and Mars than I do with Daddy and Honor. I’ll get a job! I’m moving in, that’s that.

It was a long speech for Sophie and I was impressed and warmed to my toes. Also, scared to death. But Sophie knew our financial situation. She was incredibly smart and practical. She was no nonsense. And she was right. We’d make it work.

Okay, I said, and hugged her.

I spent the next few months checking out boring boxy two-bedroom apartments in the area. We certainly couldn’t afford those. Then I checked out one-bedroom boring boxes. Couldn’t afford those either. The only place that looked feasible had a nice landlady who turned out to be not so nice when she said to my face that I wouldn’t have to worry about those people moving into her apartment complex.

Those people? I said, and snapped my check out of her hand. I am one of those people, I said, over my shoulder, not exactly knowing who the undesirables were, but not waiting to find out either.

We moved to Chicago.

Impulsive, yes, but not as crazy as it sounds, partly because housing in Chicago in the early ’90s was cheap (for a New Yorker), and my family lived about an hour northwest. On previous trips Mars and I had been to the gay AA club on Clark, so at least we knew a few folks there. Neither of us had jobs, of course, but what did that matter to trusting souls like us?

I left the harassing coworkers behind and drove a fifteen-foot Ryder truck the familiar eight hundred miles directly into the Heartland. Mars said good-bye to family, friends, box cutter. In May 1991 we leapt from the Hudson highlands to swampy Chicago and prepared a place for Sophie to fly to in August.

We were eager, naïve, and arrogant—New Yorkers in a foreign land.