

Eleven

Are You Two Sisters?

I had just stepped out of a bar in southern New Mexico, near the border of Arizona, New Mexico, and Mexico, in a tiny, isolated desert town. A man followed me out, opening the door for me, offering to help me to my car. “Are you two sisters?” he asked in a challenging tone as I stepped out of the dark bar and into the open air. He had seen me with Hannah inside while she was paying for our lunch in the adjoining restaurant. I heard his question but did not answer, simply headed for the car. My guide dog Fresco was leading me, eager to get there. The man, having seen I was blind when I stumbled a bit and bumped into tables as I made my way out of the dim interior of the bar, now offered to assist me further, following me as I walked across the dusty parking lot. “Do you need some help?” he asked. Then again, “Are you two sisters?” “No,” I said to the first question and got into the car hurriedly when I reached it.

Why do people ask if we are sisters? I thought. But more than that, I felt aware of having been asked this question many times before. Often it occurred when Hannah and I were traveling. Did women often travel with their sisters? I wondered. Was that why

people asked me about it, or assumed that we were two sisters? I thought at first that could be so. But underneath, I doubted it. I thought it was because we were lesbians, because we both had short hair, because, perhaps, we were familiar with one another—in a casual, intimate way—because we were not wearing makeup or dressy, femme-style clothes. At home sometimes, it had happened, too. A repair person would come to the house to fix the furnace or the garage door and assumed that we were sisters, commenting on it, in fact. Why did they comment? Why did they ask? Why would it matter if we were sisters or not?

I think it's similar to what happens when I am out with my guide dog and the dog is leading me. People ask, "Are you training that dog?" as if it's a question that would settle something more haunting, like, "Are you blind? Or are you sighted like me?"

In this case, the familiar occurrence would be that we were sisters—that would explain us—rather than that we were lesbians. But what do I do, turn around and say to the man in the bar, "No, we're lesbians"? I didn't want to say that because I didn't want to endanger myself. It was broad daylight. We had just had lunch. But it was at a bar and it was in a kind of no man's land out where the range stretches and there are no houses or stores for miles, where the mountains sprawl far into the distance, their huge, looming, dark figures silhouetted like proud majesties, like islands of imposing presence against the broad sky. "Why have some drunk discuss lesbianism with me?" I thought. But I also thought, "Why am I afraid—afraid to tell him what I am, afraid to be a lesbian out in public?" It was 2017, surely a time when people knew what it was, or might be more accepting than in the past when people, usually men, were beaten up in bars for being gay. I wasn't a man, and we were two women, innocuous looking enough to be mistaken for two sisters. Why not have the nerve to say, "No, we're lesbians," looking him in the eye—to the extent I can do that—and seeing what his response would be. Would he strike out at me? Or would he simply stand there and stare? "I

see,” he would say, or “I thought so.” But I kept my back turned to him, said nothing, opened the door of the car and got in.

Hannah came out later and I told her. “He asked if we were sisters,” I said.

“What did you tell him?”

“I didn’t answer,” I said. “I was afraid.”

She drove us off quietly, not criticizing me for my cowardice, probably feeling that my not responding was the safe and right thing to do in the circumstance, but also feeling, I thought, “We should be able to do this. We should no longer be afraid of a man in a bar.”

As we drove farther south that day, the man’s question haunted me, making me think about lesbianism and what it meant to me, about Hannah and me and who we were—our safety, our boundaries, our sense of separateness, our dreams.