

DIANA COMPLEX

By Madeline King

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We were quickly won over by this incandescent epistolary roman a clef addressed to Anais Nin. Though she isn't mentioned much anymore, Nin was a visible bohemian feminist in her day and a uniquely gifted writer who lives on as one of the icons of 20th C literature. Like her paramour, Henry Miller, she was asking questions about and providing answers for the nature of human sexuality that crossed lines and, of course, shocked her readers. There is an impish sophistication to King's writing that recalls Nin's style and her coquettish prose glitters seductively like jewels beneath a perfumed veil. The last word in the story is a masterpiece of phonic-crafting in which percussion triumphs over melody. (Spacing and font size is author's own. Eds.)*

Diana Complex

Dear Anaïs,

I dreamt of you last night. We were in your room, laughing, smoking and drinking plum wine. We admired each other's mouths in your vanity. You noted that my lips were always full and soft, as if just-kissed. You asked if I often kissed men. You said that I was only allowed to kiss men because I had too feminine a mouth to kiss women. Then you collapsed onto the bed and lamented your boyish hips, and your small breasts (which you showed me.)

I asked if I could wear your Nile-green dress, but you had the wild desire to go out as men that night. We were drunk and giddy, costuming ourselves behind your Coromandel screen. I put on the clothes of a *gentil-homme* in a bowler, trousers, and cravat that you tied around my neck for me. You dressed more coarsely, like a vagabond. You emerged mannish and vulgar, and I glimpsed your Latin eyes shine feverishly under your peeked cap. You looked like a writer.

We went to a bar in Clichy. We smoked cigars and drank rum. Patrons gave us hungry looks. They could see the curves of our breasts and hips push up against our clothes, and were aroused by it. My blood was scalding, and I had a sudden, childish, desire to fuck. You said: "it is good to let men have you dressed like this, as it quenches their secret homosexual desires."

You expressed great sympathy and depth of feeling, but you also warned me against fucking a woman; I would grow insatiable, like a man.

I confessed to once having dreamed of writhing on top of a woman with large breasts. I had awoken from it wet—I confided this to you, Anaïs! You laughed sweetly, regretting not to be able to gift me this pleasure yourself. You brought me to a *bordello* on la Rue Blondel. You were my mother then, choosing the perfect Renoiresque girl with care. You were a wild thing, fluttering, fondling them, laughing... through fever I saw you splendid, wanton, *incandescent*—I wondered then if I was dreaming. But then I felt your eyes settle coolly on me, when, at last, you presented me with my whore.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *“Diana Complex”* was inspired by the autobiographical writings of Anaïs Nin. Back in the early 1930’s, her attraction to Henry Miller’s wife, June, was labelled a “repressed desire to be a man” by her psychoanalyst (whom she would eventually go on to have an affair with). I was interested in exploring—and perhaps poking at—this unusual conflation of gender and sexuality.

Stylistically, I have found myself gravitating towards shorter and shorter fiction and prose-poetry. I count amongst my influences Jennifer Tseng, Sandra Cisneros, Kathryn Scanlan, Melora Wolff, Sofia Samatar and many more.

AUTHOR’S BIO: *Maddie King hails from White Plains, NY, and graduated from Skidmore College in 2018. She writes for the literary sites BLOOM and The Millions on a contributing basis. She is a judge for NYC Midnight’s 2020 and 2021 Fiction Competitions.*

