

## 2007 1<sup>st</sup> Place Winner – Student Essay Contest on Drinking Coffee Elsewhere

### Eating Cake Here

By Raisa Garcia

You think you know who you are. Right now as your eyes move across the page and your brain processes these exact words, you think you know, but you do not. Allow me to elaborate before you attempt to toss this “bizarre” accusation out of your head. Here you are reading this with the hope of receiving your piece of literature’s promised mental and emotional cake. You know you deserve a piece of that cake simply because your brain needs its daily dose of enlightening, thought provoking ideas. What you do not know is whether something will happen to you from the time you read this now to the time you finish. Furthermore, if and when something happens, you do not know how you will react, especially if that something dares to touch on your economic status, race, or sexual orientation-- anything and everything you like to believe does not matter in this world. Believe it or not, but you cannot, and will not be able to, ground yourself when the time comes for someone, whether literally or metaphorically, to push you into the corner where a dangling spotlight awaits to highlight all your misfortunes. ZZ Packer understands the idea of instability and unpredictability. Her awareness is evident in her book *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*. In the centered story of the same title, protagonist Dina demonstrates three times that people will never really know who they are on account of their unpredictable reactions and actions to a personal earthquake.

Money may not be able to buy happiness, but as Dina finds out, it can buy a few degrees of self-esteem. Dina was aware of the impression society would grab from her low economic status. In fact, she was sick of it. She was tired of cashiers looking down at the food stamps in her hand. One day, this annoyance even drove her to ditch the local grocery store and scrape her pockets for coins in order to take a bus ride to a more sophisticated, yet (luckily) stoic, store. The trip into the store was peaceful; going back home was another story. Dina, walking home in favor of the beautiful fall day, suddenly sensed footsteps following her path. Instinctively, her nonchalant walk turned into a brisk one in hopes of losing her potentially harmful follower. Losing grip on her groceries though, the follower immediately offered his hand, forcing the two to collide. After a cheesy introduction and a half question, half statement in regards to escorting Dina home, it was apparent that the young man’s approach was one-third good intentions, two-thirds interest. With sparks radiating off him, Dina caught on, and at that moment, she too had a crush on this boy named Cecil. However, before anything could flourish, her insecurities rushed in at the sight of his shoes: “They were nice shoes, real leather, a stitched design like a widow’s peak on each one, or like birds’ wings, and for the first time in [her] life [she] understood what people meant when they said ‘wing-tip shoes’ (132).” Needless to say, she ran away from him--literally--only to result in the groceries spilling all over the sidewalk. She arrived home with a loss of food and loss of self-esteem. But she felt she had to decline Cecil’s offer; she did not want him to know where she lived. After sixteen years of being part of the lower class, you would think Dina would be used to her economic situation. Who knew that it would suddenly get into the way of forming a simple friendship? Dina did not know.

It is said that certain colors have certain effects on people; as an African American, this holds true for Dina. Coming from a black community in Baltimore, going to cloud-white Yale University was a culture shock. The bad flavor in the mixing was not tasted by the blond white boys, but instead Dina herself. As an incoming freshman, Dina and her classmates were to play a few group-orientated games; however, Dina felt anything but welcomed. She seemingly overanalyzed what others may have thought of her as a very ethnic individual with a rather

negative point of view, and thus responded in an unreceptive manner to somehow resonate the imagined impressions. She aggressively refused to participate in the game of Trust in which she would have to trust those of the opposite color to catch her in her fall. Dina doubled her hostile vibe in the game similar to that of 21 Questions. When asked what inanimate object she would want to be in the whole world, she bluntly stated that she would like to be a revolver in order to wipe out all of mankind. This answer bought her a year's worth of psychiatric therapy sessions, weekly meetings with the dean, and her own dorm room. At that point, her reputation was tarnished. She entered the university as a nobody-- a crumpled application paper soon to be unfolded and known. Unfortunately, before her true colors could even be revealed, Dina herself put up a blockade in front of her in the form of a psychotic's face. Who knew that a change of scenery, expected scenery, would shake her mindset that much? Dina did not know.

While your economic status and race are chosen by life's lottery, your sexual orientation is seen as a choice by today's society; this quality, as Dina discovers, is the hardest one for people to accept if you are homosexual. According to (politically incorrect) biology, if you are a girl, you are supposed to like boys, and vice-versa. Because of this unwritten "law," people tend to ostracize those who drift from the implied rules. Dina did not give much thought into this life obstacle until she stumbled upon Heidi at the door of her room. The thing about Heidi was that she was personally a Henrik. Her "aspiring plumber" look justified this. For some unknown reason though, the two became friends, contrary to their supposed misanthrope personalities. Their friendship deepened when they went from dinner buddies at the Dining Commons to co-workers at the Saybrook dining hall. It was in the midst of all the washing in the back, away from the public, that Dina fell in love with Henrik. Whether it was a love for a friend or a love for a potential girlfriend, it did not matter. Any close affiliation with Henrik drew more attention to Dina-- in a bad way. After Henrik publicly announced that she was a proud lesbian, her relationship with Dina quickly diminished like a drop of sweat evaporating over one's sun-soaked skin. Dina simply did not want to make the public's view of them two a reality; she would not be able to handle the burden of being labeled gay. Taking a step back, Henrik did not even expect a romantic relationship with Dina. She just wanted a friend, especially at a time when her mother was diagnosed with cancer. And Dina would have been a good friend to run to too, considering that her mother had passed away from an illness. Who knew that others' opinions would influence one to that extent? -- To the point where he or she would sacrifice a meaningful relationship for the sake of avoiding harsh criticism? Dina did not know.

As much as you may want to spit out the sour cake and claim it is generic and you want a refund in the form of time, in the back of your head you know it is real. Of course you have, or will have, memories in your head that you wish you could permanently erase due to their brutal effects on your soul, but those instances are not all your fault. It is reality's gravitational law to remind you that humans cannot control everything, including themselves. Why does this exist? Perhaps it is due to your desire to be perfect. As a reality check, imperfection is perfection or else you would not have a purpose in this world since there would be nothing for you to learn. Furthermore, there is always a flip side to everything. Who says the unexpected has to be bad? You may expect, or be expected, to be the villain, but actually end up as the hero. Dina was just a figure to strongly demonstrate that no matter how old and wise you are, you cannot predict your reactions and actions. Different chemicals act accordingly to different chemicals. At the end of reading "Drinking Coffee Elsewhere," one may wonder why ZZ Packer had Dina go through such experiences involving economic status, race, and sexual orientation. The message is clear: Packer advocates acceptance towards the past, present, and future. To accept is to understand. As opposed to drinking coffee elsewhere to repress reality, eat cake here. Having your feet on the ground will not necessarily prevent the ground from seesawing, but with your mind out of the clouds, you may get to know yourself just that much more.