GIRLS' LUNCH AT CAFÉ BLASÉ

ELIZABETH MAILER

ONE AFTERNOON IN THE LATE SPRING OF 1976, when I was 16, the phone rang in the Upper West Side apartment that I shared with my mother, Adele, and my sister, Danielle. It was my father calling.

"Betsy, I want you to meet a Boss Lady," Dad said. "She's going to stop by to meet you tonight at your place."

I cut right to the chase: "OK, Dad, who is she?"

"I'll explain later," he said. "Just be nice to her." He hung up the phone.

Truth be told, I groaned out loud. We had been around this block before. When it came to Dad and women, I never knew what to expect.

My mother and Danielle happened to be out that night. So I would have to meet this Mystery Lady on my own. I knew absolutely nothing about her. I was half-dreading it. Besides, it was a school night, I was tired, and I still had a lot of homework to do.

She was supposed to stop by our place at 8:00 that night but the doorman rang upstairs to announce her arrival at 7:40.

"Hi, I'm Barbara Norris," she said when I greeted her at the front door. She was quite tall, a little too thin and very pretty. Her style that day was a cross between Hippie/Mod/Chic and I can remember her outfit to the letter: she wore a long, casual, floral-print dress in terracotta, olive green and beige with a macramé vest and big hoop earrings. Her gorgeous, shoulder-length red hair was pulled back into a ponytail. And the "Corkies" platform sandals she wore made her look even taller.

She offered up a firm handshake.

"Sorry I'm so early," she apologized. "I'm still trying to figure out the timing of the subways." She was soft-spoken with a distinct Southern accent.

"It's ok," I chirped. "I was just watching tv," I said.

"What are you watching?" she asked politely.

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I was embarrassed to tell her.

"Um . . . The . . . Beverly Hillbillies," I said sheepishly. It seemed so crass to be watching the latter on this particular occasion; but the fact is, I had not known until this minute that my lovely guest hearkened from the South.

"This is such a stupid show, isn't it?" I said, trying somehow to compensate. I made a move to turn off the tv. "I'm so sorry. I hope you're not offended."

"Oh, no, not at all," she grinned. "It's just a silly stereotype. Besides, I get a kick out of Granny. Please don't turn it off on my account. In fact, let's go watch the rest together."

I offered her a cold drink and we sat down together on the couch. We watched the rest of the show, laughing at the corny dialogue and silly antics of Ellie Mae, Jethro, Granny and Jed Clampett. After that, we talked for about an hour. I liked her but I was somewhat guarded. I did not want to like her too much, in the event that I might not ever get to see her again. After all, if things did not work out with her and Dad, I didn't want to be disappointed. Right then, I decided not to worry about it. All I knew was that it was fun to hang out with her. Vis-à-vis our backgrounds, it was obvious that we were worlds apart. But when it came to a sense of humor, a love of fun and a creative sensibility, we were simpatico.

When I met Barbara, I was sixteen and she was twenty-six. As we were only ten years apart, it was a lot like having another Big Sister. From that first summer in 1976, when she arrived on the scene (with Matt) to encounter, head-on, seven high-octane, precocious Mailer kids, it was a lot for anyone in her shoes to contend with. She was a good sport. That August, Dad had rented a cabin on Lieutenant's Island in Wellfleet, MA on the Cape. It was a funky cabin with modest amenities and it was more like an army barracks. When the tide was high, the bay came all the way in and covered over the land; which meant that we all had to wade through waist-high water, even late at night, to go back and forth from the cabin to the mainland.

The following summer, in August 1977, we returned to Maine after a short hiatus. Hiking was a big activity for us as a family, but Kate, Barbara and I lagged behind the rest of the family on most of the trails. Some of the walks were tiring and tedious, like the long trail on Cadillac Mountain. I would start to complain about the endless climb. Then Barbara would start singing; and before too long, she was leading us in a rousing chorus of "My Boyfriend's Back" and "It's My Party and I'll Cry if I Want To." We were so

engrossed in the singing, we kept up the pace and forgot we were tired. In between songs, we chatted about the past; and Barbara shared amusing tidbits from her own childhood, like her frequent morning routine of drinking Coke and eating Ring Dings for breakfast and the summer she worked in a pickle factory. On rainy days that same summer (August 1977), Barbara would drive the whole Mailer gang to the mall in Ellsworth, Maine for Big Macs, matinees at the local movie theater and browsing in the bookstore; and once or twice a week, she headed up the daunting task of grocery shopping for eleven hungry Mailers.

In July 1982, just a few months before my twenty-second birthday, I broke up with my First Love/college sweetheart and I was devastated. I couldn't eat, couldn't sleep and was down to 110 pounds. Fun and Distraction were Barbara's Rx for a broken heart; and by golly, it worked. Along with my sisters, Kate and Danielle, Barbara kept us very busy that month in Provincetown. We had Girls' Lunch Out at Café Blasé; clothes-shopping sprees at Silk and Feathers; movies at the New Art Cinema; and trips to Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream Parlor in the center of town. One special day, we made a foray to Adam's Pharmacy to buy lipstick, eye shadow, rouge and mascara. Then we headed back to the rented house, parked ourselves in front of the vanity table upstairs in the master bedroom, and watched Barbara do a whole makeover on each of us. Even with cosmetics, she was an artist, and she could play with the different shades of eye shadow as if they were her palette of acrylic paints. After she did my makeup and teased my hair into a bee-hive, I borrowed one of her feather boas and slipped on a pair of her high-heel stilettos. Barb showed us how to suck in our cheeks, tilt our heads a certain way and project that "Come Hither" look. I felt like a model on the cover of *Cosmo*. We took turns doing campy poses and we sashayed back and forth from one end of the bedroom to the other. Meanwhile, Barbara took lots of pictures with a Polaroid camera that flashed like a mock-Paparazzi. I remember at the time thinking: "Well, it may be over with Phil, but right now I feel like Hot Stuff; and, as the Gloria Gaynor song says, 'I Will Survive'"!

Barbara had a way of exhibiting grace under fire. In the Fall of 1982, Barbara's parents, James and Gaynell Davis, were in New York, visiting from Atkins, Arkansas. They were still getting to know the whole Mailer clan. One night, there was a big family dinner at the Brooklyn Heights apartment. I think the unspoken hope was that we kids would all be on our best behavior. I was sitting on a stool at the kitchen counter, chatting with James and

Gaynell. We did not have much in common, but what we had in common was our Faith and Fundamentalist perspective. James and Gaynell were Southern Baptists and I was a Born-Again Christian at the time. The thing we could talk about, if nothing else, was Jesus and the Bible and "Staying right with the Lord." Well, that night (of all nights), I decided to have my very first mixed drink. I don't know what possessed me. An innate mischief or perversity, I suppose. Not knowing the correct proportions, I mixed myself a gin and tonic with way too much gin. By the time I drank half of the cocktail, I was hammered. Quite randomly, I picked up a copy of *Newsweek* that was lying on the counter. There was a cover story about AIDS. I thumbed through the magazine and in perfect earshot of James and Gaynell, I drunkenly blurted out: "The experts say they don't know what is causing AIDS. But the other night, I heard somebody on a Talk Show imply that AIDS began with one guy who went to Africa and fucked a baboon up the ass!"

Well, James and Gaynell visibly paled; they were dumbstruck. Norris, who also overheard my outrageous *faux pas*, was probably mortified but did not show it, God bless her. Instead, she was able to finesse a very awkward situation. She winked at me and said: "Oh, Bets, that Ol' Man Liquor and the Devil Himself are trading off with you on the dance floor tonight, aren't they!" Then she turned to her parents and winked at them. And after his initial shock, James actually chuckled.

When I think about what Barbara signed up for and what she took on when she first came on the scene in 1976—the joys, the surprises, the stresses, the adventures and the challenges in becoming Mrs. Norman Mailer (with five ex-wives preceding her) and the formidable task of becoming Stepmother to seven—I do marvel at her grace, good will and sense of humor through it all.

I shall miss those days.