Sunday and Me

Betty Fouch

Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/calliope

Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/calliope/vol13/iss2/27
I had lunch today in the University Student Center. I ate downstairs in the crowded snack bar, sitting in the stadium-size room where plastic furniture the varied hues of a color chart accommodated a mob of satisfied-looking snackers.

Biting into a ham salad sandwich I marveled that several hundred students were impervious to the pounding problems of Sonny and Cher. The cacophonous jukebox dinned like a frustrated Big Ben shrilling for attention. Nobody cared. The Magnavox was very much alone.

Jay and the Americans were shouting "Sunday and Me" as I sipped a cherry coke and considered the lonely life of a jukebox. Depressed by the mass indifference, I gathered up my coat and handbag and made my way through the smoke and clatter. Beside the doorway, a coed with long blonde hair was tacking up a bright pink sign on a bulletin board. The black letters announced: PERSHING RIFLES MIXER SATURDAY NIGHT!

Joining the stream of students climbing the stairs, I moved out into the winter sunshine and pensively watched brown leaves undulate high in the oak trees across the avenue. Twenty-five oaks stood guard over the old white mansion called the Oaklands.

I first saw this soldiery when I came to Western for the week-end in 1939. The trees weren't part of the campus at that time. Western State Teachers College was located on a hilltop between Davis Street and Oakland Drive. There were 2500 students that year. Among the freshmen were two girls from my hometown. They had been coeds for six weeks when they met me at the Greyhound bus on a Friday afternoon.

We went straight to the Chocolate Shop and talked about the week-end over marshmallow sundaes. These
girls with curling blonde hair each weighed 100 lbs. They were each five feet tall. No matter how many marshmallow sundaes they consumed, they still wore Size 7 dresses. Walking down Lovell Street with them I felt like a Size 16 Kaye Ballard between two Ann-Margrets. They took turns carrying my overnight bag, and we sang "You Are My Sunshine" just as we used to do on our way to high school.

We spent Friday night preparing for the Saturday night mixer. We put up our hair, filed our nails, creamed our faces, and we exercised. We went to bed early and whispered most of the night. I found out that we had no dates for the mixer. We would go stag, my friends informed me, and then calmly fell asleep. Their small blonde snores vibrated the Dutch household while I lay in my bed considering my straight brown hair and my large bones. In the dark I found my bag and fumbled for my Maybelline eyelash curler. I lay in bed desperately curling my lashes until I fell asleep, one hand clasping the curler as it transformed my left eye into an irresistible orb.

Saturday morning we had breakfast at the Little Mich, then hiked downtown to shop. My friends remarked on the distinctive appearance of my left eye. We agreed that it would be best if I stood in profile before the stagline at the mixer.

At Burdick Street I followed the girls up an old staircase to Sally's Clothes Closet. Carol and June turned over their lunch money regularly to Sally every week. They lunched on cokes and cigarettes. This week Carol was paying for a sloppy joe sweater that came down over the hips. June was buying three Indian bracelets which matched last week's Indian ring. I bought a bottle of Pink Carnation cologne and a shade of lipstick
labeled Ever-Ready Red. With our purchases we walked to The Pharm for lunch. Carol and June ordered nickel cokes with plenty of ice. They sipped slowly between cigarette puffs. Their cokes lasted a half an hour.

At The Pharm I met some men, slight acquaintances of Carol's. There was a boy who had flunked out and was working nights in a paper mill, a town boy with buck teeth, and a scrawny freshman with yellow jaundice.

In the afternoon we walked around the campus. It consisted of a few staid buildings planted around a small quadrangle. We inspected the inside of the new buildings, then took the cable-car down the hill to Davis Street. Back in the room on Oak Street, we washed our faces and changed our clothes for the dance.

Carol slipped into her new sweater. June clattered her new bracelets onto her dainty wrist. I put on my new Marshall Field & Co. outfit: white silk blouse, red corduroy gored skirt, red corduroy jacket, red corduroy porkpie hat, white silk anklets, and red corduroy oxfords with crepe soles. My friends—in their sloppy joes and pleated skirts—stood to one side and surveyed me.

"You look very nice," they said uncertainly.

"Well," I said, "they told me at Field's College Shop that this is what everyone is wearing on all the Big Ten campuses."

The girls pushed up the sleeves of their sweaters. I sprayed myself liberally with Pink Carnation, and we walked to Walwood Union harmonizing "You Tell Me Your Dreams, I'll Tell You Mine." We elbowed our way up the stairs to the ballroom where a brassy band was playing "The Big Apple." The ballroom was milling with confident-looking students.
June was immediately approached by a boy from her biology class. She handed me her coat and they jitter-bugged out of sight. Carol was invited to dance by a rhetoric classmate. She handed me her coat.

As I carried our things to the cloakroom, I observed that the national costume seemed to be sloppy joe sweaters and pleated skirts. I was the only girl in the room wearing a porkpie hat. I removed it unobtrusively.

About fifty couples were circling Stag Island on the dance floor. The band was very loud, and the overhead lights were so bright that the smallest pimple could be detected on anyone's face.

One hundred and fifty coeds graced the north wall, all of them wearing bright, expectant smiles. I felt my face form the same expression as I joined them. After that I smiled at anything in trousers that walked toward me. I smiled at the stagline en masse and I smiled at the band while they played "Moonlove," "Deep Purple," "Stardust," and "My Reverie."

I moved behind a short redhead to hide my big feet. A man was coming. I gave my smile special meaning. He asked the redhead to dance.

I tried again, this time a pleasant expression with the smile in the eyes. Ever-Ready lips curved gently as Mona Lisa might have curved hers at a mixer. Nothing.

Perhaps a peal of careless laughter. I pealed. Girls standing near me moved away slightly. Shunned now by my own kind, I was desperate. I thought of ripping away one blouse sleeve to expose a ripe shoulder. Deciding against this, I unbuttoned one button at the top of my blouse and at the same time took a step toward the stagline. The stagline, as one, stepped backward.
I singled out a tall man whose dark curls cascaded onto his Greek forehead and stared very hard at him. I twitched my hips as Rita Hayworth had done in *Gilda* and whispered hoarsely across the room at him, "Put the Blame on Mamie, Boy"! He saw my lips move and averted his eyes.

There were now only 124 wallflowers gracing the north wall. Ten were dancing with men shorter than themselves. Four were dancing with men who couldn't dance. Nine had left to play ping-pong. One had locked herself in the john and was crying hysterically. Two of her friends were pounding on the door begging her not to destroy herself. No man is worth it, I heard them plead.

Now that I am many men wiser I know they spoke the truth, but that night I was 18 and yearned to be popular. I considered the problem: how does a clean, decent American girl capture a stag's imagination? How does a witty, lovable kid make her charms known? I wasn't six feet tall, didn't have halitosis, wasn't cross-eyed. My garments weren't drab. My complexion--thanks to Lux Toilet Soap--was like a Hollywood star's.

Staring down at my Big Tens, I conceived a daring scheme. I would remove my underclothing in the powder room and return to the ballroom swinging free and easy, my belt pulled three notches too tight, my knees smiling out to the stagline. That ought to do it. I took a step toward the powder room.

But I didn't have the nerve. Instead, I got my jacket and my porkpie and strolled downstairs trying to look as though I was about to leave with my date. On the first floor I tried to look as though my date were waiting for me outside. I pushed open the double doors and fled into
the cold October night. To the north a clock was striking midnight. Like Cinderella's ballgown, my golden smile disintegrated.

I walked briskly down the hill past the men's dormitory and through the hollow stadium, looking up at the stars to keep from being afraid. I stepped over some railroad tracks, walked through a small field and came to a macadam road. I trudged about half a mile down the middle of the road, shoulders hunched and hands warmed only by jacket pockets.

Over to the left I saw a big white house with a company of tall oak trees standing guard in front of it. There must have been two dozen trees. I walked among them and stared at the darkened mansion with its strange cupola.

I leaned against one of the rough old soldiers and listened to the rustling of stars. There was nothing now but stars, trees, the silent house, Sunday and me.