

Notes of a Mad Girl #13 - Fashion, flaming house and Machu Picchu

Steven called and said he was coming to Houston. For the first three minutes I was thrilled and blabbing way too much. I sobered up considerably when he said he was accompanying his girl friend to a job interview at a landscape architect firm and that he felt that she really needed some fashion help. The interview was in Houston at the firm's mother ship but the job would be for a position in their home city of Boston.

It was apparent that Steve hadn't seen me in years since I pretty much wore black spandex everything. I dressed like a cross between a Goth (way before Gothic was a style), an athlete and a biker chick. I wore high top black boots, bike shorts; tight/sleeveless tops and only varied my accessories per the occasion. But I was a regular sightseer at Neiman Marcus and Tootsies and loved beautifully constructed clothes even if I couldn't afford them. Basically I was a "good" clothing voyeur and the Houston Galleria was my oyster.

One day I walked into my lithography class at Rice University and remarked how great everyone looked that morning. The students laughed hysterically and then said it was "Dress like Karin Broker Day".

So Steven and Cynthia arrived and we headed directly to the galleria to shop with her money. She arrived wearing way too many yards of flowered and puffy fabric and left with classic white fitted blouses and beautifully tailored muted straight skirts and pants. Cynthia had straight, blondish, collar length hair with bangs and carried a thin body. She waltzed into her successful interview simply yet sharply styled and I was introduced to one of the best friends I could ever hope to meet. i.e. Cynthia's interviewer, Kevin.

Kevin and I flew to Istanbul, Turkey together sometime after that first encounter. Kevin went for business and I tagged along for Far Eastern intrigue and the love of a Turkish bazaar. While sitting in the Istanbul Hilton I picked up an English/Turkish newspaper. One small bit caught my eye. "Bird carries a lit cigarette into nest and catches home on fire

in Jeannette, Pennsylvania". That town was one mile from my hometown of Penn. I could finally say "small world".

So what's this about Machu Picchu? A few years after the events noted above I headed to Ecuador and Peru with a graduate school art friend from Madison, Cathy Kernan. If Quito was brilliant and exotic then Machu Picchu was storybook breathtaking. The train trip to the base of Machu Picchu was crowded and exhilarating. We overnighted in a Swiss looking chalet and in the morning dark began our ascent to the famed Machu Picchu with weird glo sticks to light our way. As the sun started to rise the fog rolled in. But for some reason the early birds (all five of us) saw that the path to Huayna Picchu was open. Huayna Picchu is the magnificently tall mountain pictured in the photographs of Machu Picchu jutting high above and behind the site. We signed our names and passport numbers into the registry book as we began our ascent. I was wearing a mid-calf denim skirt. Cathy felt that we shouldn't insult the indigenous tribes in South America by wearing pants or shorts. We pulled ourselves up with ropes that were attached to the hillside for tourist safety and crawled vertically through passages cut through gigantic rocks. We arrived at the summit in the cool morning just in time to see the fog slowly dissolving far below us to uncover the famed and mysterious footprints of Machu Picchu. We all sat there and I knitted. Every new location in South America gave me inspiration for new lines on my sweater project and I was now feverishly knitting mountain shapes. We sat up there a long time. Every few minutes I would look up from my colorful project and gasp. The distance below us to the plateau of Machu Picchu was even dwarfed by the distance to the bottom of those Andes.

We began our trek down to the hallowed Inca city on a narrow switchback trail. There were no rails or ropes for protection via this route. In an instant I tripped on my skirt and performed a 360-degree somersault to the switchback below. I gripped hard at the dirt trail and alternated between laughing and wet eyed crying. A few guys ran up to me with panic stamped on their eyeballs. One guy kept saying how interesting my skirt looked as I flipped completely in the air. In another instant I also realized how lucky I was. There was not another switchback below the one I had landed on. The words "straight down" could now apply here. My recorded passport name and number

would have helped identify my body and provided the appropriate addresses for the Peruvian authorities to ship my skirt clad body back to Texas.

My fashion sense had morphed into a near death experience. And in one small moment I felt sympathetic with that poor small bird who carried what she thought was a prized nest treasure only to set the whole damn house on fire in a small industrial town west of Pittsburgh.