

Notes of a Mad Girl #14 - A college war zone

From 1981 until 1985 I was a Resident Associate at Lovett College on the campus of Rice University. That was the official name for my position but in short I was a dorm mom with a tenure track teaching position in the Department of Art and Art History.

The students at Lovett were excited that an artist would consider living in their building. To make their point that I would be welcome these young men literally renovated extra space so that I could have a campus studio. This translated into using a sledgehammer to knock a hole between the elevator lobby and what would be my kitchen-dining room. They voted to forgo the elevator lobby on the second floor of a six-floor structure. My rooms were cute, sufficient, and the rent was zero dollars with no utility bills and three campus meals a day.

The year I agreed to be a dorm inhabitant Lovett College went co-ed. As a previously all male college Lovett was wild, crass and on the verge of looking like a remake of Lord of the Flies. To the chagrin and alarm of all parents of university age females the solution to normalizing the situation was to "bring in girls". The idea was brilliantly simple. Would guys truly wish to look like idiots in front of smart university women? On most fronts the mixology of women worked.

Not all brilliant plans are 100% workable at the onset. During one college meeting in the commons one male student stated loudly "we thought the girls weren't going to say anything". But for the most part, the men shaved on a daily basis and only reverted to typical college behavior of stupid Friday and Saturday nights drinking copious amounts of hard alcohol and beer.

The first years of my R.A. stint had shaky and some startling moments for the beginning of the "80's ". After the protests of the 60's and 70's most young people my age were up for a breather after protesting inequality, racism and political aggression such as the Vietnam war. I was ready for a cup of tea, making art and learning how to manoeuver around a remarkable university governed by primarily older

male professors mildly shocked yet totally welcoming at the energy of a female printmaker and draftsman.

So my foray into college living gave me opportunities that were just too great to be true. I could eat, work, teach, make art and sleep without ever leaving the campus.

But as the saying goes "there is no such thing as a free horse" and this was not the ticket to independence I had envisioned. True, all the wonderful bits stated above applied but the tricky point was the switch from all male college to a coed residency. And as an artist who had just recently left one of the most liberal university's in the country, University of Wisconsin-Madison, I became the match to a pile of male anger, sexual disappointments and hormonal frustrations.

My first "eh what?" moments came when the Lovett college student governing body started to discuss the waitresses for their "Pirates of the Caribbean" Annual party. A selected number of guys were instructed to find the most endowed women at Lovett to serve the party goers and if there weren't enough of those females available on site then they needed to suggest and approach buxom girls from the other colleges on campus. My reaction to years of Lovett students hosting scantily clad parties can now be noted simply as the "Broker vs. Lovett Males files". My concerns began as artistic interventions. The outfits designed for the waitresses looked like the girls barely survived the shipwreck what with bits of torn bed sheets of fabric barely covering their private parts while the men survivors got to wear swords, pirate vests and with only their pants shredded slightly at a raised hem. The guys wanted my approval and every evening I single handedly argued against 25 to 50 guys at a time.

I wanted democracy. The men wanted scantily clad girls. So we compromised. The sign-up sheet for waiters (first time) and waitresses was pinned to the wall. The boys said that no self-respecting guy would sign up. I said that even our college's flat-chested girls would enlist to help their college make the party a success. The list of guys and girls filled within the hour. I incorrectly thought the guys who signed up on the list were sympathizers with their female cohorts but one guys looked aghast when I said as much. He said, "It's really the best way to meet

good looking chicks. If you are serving drinks you get to talk to girls who under other circumstances wouldn't give you the time of day, you get to work all night with great looking girls serving food without feeling like a pervert, and even the other less endowed waitresses were open to conquest".

The party was wonderful and I read what seemed like 300 fortunes sitting in the corner of the room with a small table and lamp with a worn set of Tarot cards wearing a scantily clad gypsy outfit. The funny thing was all the guys asked about their careers and all the girls wanted to know about finding a guy. My last reading finished at 2 in the morning.

So armed the crazy thought that Lovett men needed to be sensitized to the opposite sex I invited about six of my female colleagues from across campus and disciplines for lunch in my artist/Lovett College quarters. My purpose was to enlist more faculty women to become Associates of Lovett College (non-residents). It was a lovely lunch until we retired to the deck outside my rooms so that a few ladies could smoke. I heard a noise above our heads just in time to see a thirty-gallon trash can full of water being dumped from the sixth floor balcony. Everyone was drenched. I had just met these women an hour before and now they were soaked, screaming. And demanding a campus police escort off the premises.

I flew up to the sixth floor opening door after door in search of a wet handed guy all the while screaming incoherently about wanting the perpetrators heads on poles until finally the Lovett College president quietly said that maybe I should return to my quests on the second floor. I wasn't surprised that not one person wished to visit Lovett a second time.

The Interim College Master and one of the most sensitive faculty men to ever walk the halls of Rice, Stephen Klineberg, got up during dinner one evening and gave the residents one of the most grueling, heartfelt and sad speeches I had or have to date ever heard. In effect, "how could you embarrass so horribly a professor and one of your own?" Even I felt awful for me.

Armed with the notion that I had to enlighten my own sex tribe I taped a signup list on my studio door (former elevator lobby) for the "First annual Joyce Rubash Film Festival". J. Rubash was the woman responsible for the barely digestible college dorm food across campus and for keeping my weight to my slim 110 pound figure.

The rules to go on the film festival were short. You had to be female, 18 and dress conservatively for the field trip. Only six girls signed up. My disappointment lasted about a minute because these six young women were exceptionally bright, funny and came armed with feminist notes and facts.

I packed the ladies into the van and we headed to Westheimer Avenue in the Montrose Area of Houston. With a bag full of quarters I paid their admittance fees into one of the plethora of sex shops lining that infamous street and the poor owner asked timidly if we were working on college term papers. The back rooms with their sex holes in the walls, the porn flic titles and sex toys and the sheer actual filth of the place were duly noted and we headed back towards the van. We walked past men interestingly dressed as women and had two beer bottles thrown at us from a moving car. We were having fun so we went and had dessert and coffee. Arriving back to campus all smiling and laughing we sobered up when each of us got to our dorm rooms. Our front doors to all six of our rooms were piled high with stinking rubbish and our windows were scribbled in paint with obscenities. We stopped overtly educating the boys of Lovett and went about our lives.

Despite the turmoil written here the four years I spent at Lovett were wonderful, kind, generous and insanely fun. I learned a lot about gender interactions and during the last College Night dinner party sitting at a round table with eleven gorgeous looking ladies one remark made those four years a 100% worthwhile venture. She said in all sincerity (paraphrasing here the best I can) "we all want to thank you for taking the brunt of the sexism the guys at Lovett had to offer these last four years. We were able to study, work and participate in this place because all their anger and stupidity were directed at you."

I began my four-year military service at Lovett College as a relatively quiet artist and ended my co-ed war stint with all my female sensibilities firmly and securely intact.

A huge thank-you to my many, many young male and female friends of Lovett College during my early years at Rice University.