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Confessions of a Phi Ep man

The influence of older brothers.

by Jessica Raimi

In my lost youth, before I became conventional, I joined a Columbia fraternity. It was the end of my freshman year at Barnard, and I was tired of the shrieks and giggles of women. So when I heard that Phi Epsilon Pi on 114th Street was having trouble filling its rooms, but that preference was given to members, I inquired whether I might join. In April of 1970, along with three other women and half a dozen men, I pledged.

Not that I approved of joining anything; I just wanted to get a double room off campus for \$75 a month. But Phi Ep prided itself on being the frat for those who were not fraternity types—it had briefly harbored Mark Rudd dur-

ing the 1968 student strike. Its traditions were tattered, mainly residing in the elaborate initiation process. Otherwise the place was a rooming house and crash pad. I was not to learn for another fifteen years that some fraternities practice philanthropy (though we lent our social room to two homeless men for a while); even communal dining was only a legend at Phi Ep. We had neither rings nor sweatshirts; we did not even have a file of term papers. Thus the prospect of women joining violated no obvious tradition.

Two of the women were pledging as a courtesy: they had been living in the house for a year and were about to leave. They shared the room I coveted,

the fourth floor double known as the Crazy Room, reputed to inspire mysterious freakouts; I seem to recall they practiced white magic. (The preceding year, my friends Richard and Gordon had lived there and driven each other crazy—Gordon won the grunge prize for going the longest without washing his sheets.)

I remember little of what was called Hell Week—the hazing preceding initiation—save the night the pledges were told, "We need a gourmet, a mathematician, an author . . ." and we had to volunteer for contests with the brothers. The gourmet, it turned out, had to eat an entire loaf of Wonder Bread faster than his challenger from the brotherhood; the mathematician had to run around campus counting the urns adorning the fences and gates. As the author, I had to write a page of pornography. It was adjudged literary but not pornographic. I wish I'd saved it.

Last spring I was invited to be an Elder in the initiation ceremony, and so intact was this one tradition that afterwards I felt I had precisely relived an episode in my past. Phi Ep men vow to tell no one save a fiancé or spouse the details of the ritual. But perhaps my brothers will forgive me for hinting.

Phi Ep's is in some ways a parody of a fraternity initiation. The pledges are locked in a room for several hours, before they are led to the social room, where they repeat interminable vows of loyalty and good conduct, and are tutored in the lofty aims and secret handshake of the brotherhood. Then comes the test of their manhood, which I cannot detail lest the magic be dissipated. No spiritous liquors are offered the pledges, nor do they lift weights: they are merely forced to witness, shall we say, an obtuse bureaucracy grinding its gears. Pledges of both sexes have been reduced to tears at the spectacle. When the lights come on, one feels himself truly passed through the flames and bound in confraternity. I had never seen myself as a Honeybear, but I was proud to say I was a Phi Ep man.

At the end of the school year I moved to the Crazy Room. My new roommate was a young Frenchwoman named Blandine, unaffiliated with the university or the frat, who worked at the

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French Government Tourist Office downtown. I had met her in my Barnard dorm, where she was crashing in the room of a girl who was secretly living off campus with her boyfriend. Blandine had come to New York to improve her English and her political consciousness, and Columbia was the place for that.

The men of Phi Ep were not football players. Several were on the track team; they listened to Joni Mitchell and had beautiful legs. Another studied constantly, dreaming of law school and being able to help his parents out. One was emaciated and quiet and kept his room neat as a pin, with birthday cards he'd received standing at attention on his dresser; another smoked dope and listened to Jimi Hendrix. My high school friend John would come down to our floor to pace the hallway while he read Dostoevsky.

One advantage of not being in the dorm was the freedom to decorate. My predecessors had painted the room entirely black; on one wall I painted an airplane about to land. On the wall by my bed I wrote the lyrics to John Lennon's "Instant Karma" ("What in the world are you thinking of? Laughing in the face of love?"). Above her bed Blandine painted a quote from Gide: *Mon paresseux bonheur qui longtemps sommeilla s'éveille*,¹ and a popular feminist logo of the time, a fist within the symbol of woman. On the ceiling I hung among the sprinkler pipes the legs to an ironing board (I forget why) and six broken black umbrellas I'd found on the street (a memento mori).

The social life was better than in the Barnard dorm—this was before women thought hanging out with women was social life. John and I were elected social chairmen. We had no budget and our social room had no television, only sofas without cushions, mattresses from the street and a pingpong table that had once been the board for a legendary game of Monopoly. We rented movies by the auteurs we admired: Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* and *Foreign Correspondent*; Joseph McGrath's *The Bliss of Mrs. Blossom*, which we ran five times over the weekend. After we showed *Suddenly Last Summer*, the Tennessee Williams drama concerning one Sebastian slashed to death by angry children, we served a six-foot hero

sandwich shrouded in a sheet and labeled "Sebastian."

We also had, by popular demand, keg parties, to which the brothers invited friendly girls from the Fashion Institute—the men may have found Barnard women intimidating, and Blandine and I were considered eccentric. Certainly one young man was memorably silenced by Blandine when, making party talk, he inquired, "Are you really French?" and she cast her eyes down modestly and replied, "Actually, I'm the daughter of Jupiter and a Frenchwoman."

With our parties John and I were trying to be the debonair aesthetes we had been back in Rochester, but it didn't take. That year one had to have a position—on the war, on the relevance of our education, on the whole zeitgeist checklist. I never knew whom to believe.

The political miasma was thicker at The Bertha, the apartment building on 111th Street where Richard and Gordon lived in an unofficial Phi Ep outpost. They began saying of nearly everything, "It's so bourgeois," and speaking a jargon whose terms they seemed too bored to define. Nobody would say why the Cultural Revolution had made the Chinese want to dress alike, or how television would create a new, non-linear consciousness in America. They told me to subscribe to WBAI, a non-commercial, leftist radio station, and I began to cut classes and listen to government hearings on the My Lai massacre and feminists explaining why the personal was the political.

I thought my introductory economics course made sense, but Gordon said, "After they teach you supply and demand curves, they tell you the real world doesn't work that way anyhow." He rented an apartment in Chinatown and devoted more and more of his time to some kind of political organizing there. I helped Richard paint a violently deformed American flag across two walls of his living room. When squatters took over some abandoned buildings on Amsterdam Avenue, Richard and Blandine began working in the free food store the students set up there. One day when the project found itself without wheels, Richard made the run for vegetables in his car, a 1950's Rolls borrowed from his mother. I teased him about this, but he refused to acknowledge any contradiction.

Politics infected the atmosphere at the house as well. Two friends of the frat, not Columbia affiliates, who often stayed when they were in the city, were known as the guys with the briefcases and the vicuña coats. They were handsome and gallant and shared their drugs, and were professional thieves—not of wallets or car radios, but airplane tickets and clothes from expensive stores. There was an unspoken assumption that they were politically correct. People spoke of "liberating" books from the bookstore. The house pay phone had a loose wire which could be manipulated to give back all the money inserted for a long-distance call, so a communal can of change was perpetually recycled. Blandine maintained that such actions hastened the demise of capitalism; I said businesses just raised their prices to cover losses. We argued these points endlessly.

That spring Blandine met a guy from Williams at a demonstration, and soon there were three of us living in the room on weekends. We still had our laughs, though I was glad when they were away and I could be alone to write. I had recurring dreams of airplanes falling out of the sky and announcements of nuclear war, and I felt I was missing the point of my studies. When I asked my French professor why we were counting instances of alliteration in Flaubert's prose, she got angry at me. I wrote in my journal, "I'd rather put things together than take things apart."

I couldn't abandon the notion that capitalism might work, and even had flashes of believing the domino theory, but in a last effort to look politically serious to my brothers I journeyed with them to meet a hundred thousand doves in Washington on May Day 1971 to stop traffic to stop the government that wouldn't stop the war. I got a bruise on my leg from a cop's nightstick and showed it to everyone.

Late that spring, during my first acid trip, Richard told me, "We're all in a trap, but we can walk around in it." It sounded plausible. One day I went to my class on Goethe's *Faust* with a question mark painted on my forehead. My professor shook her head sadly and told me, "You do this because you're bored here. You should drop out before you flunk out." At the end of the semester I withdrew from Barnard, left my brothers, and sought refuge from my education.

¹"My lazy happiness, which slept so long, awakens."

