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WALLKILL VALLEY WRITERS



Anthology
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Forever Dorky

I. Musical Comedy

For three months in 1970, or maybe it was 1971, I was a student of the accordion. I carried my rented accordion in a bulky, square case that looked like a ventriloquist's dummy-carrying case. Accordions and ventriloquists – I was a frizzy-haired, brace-faced, ten-year-old, walking vaudeville act in search of a spotlight.

A year or so after the Woodstock festival shook the country, I walked three blocks from my house to the large, beautiful, early 20th-century house of Mr. and Mrs. Borgia for twice-weekly accordion lessons. Mr. Borgia had taught the clarinet to my sister, and Mrs. Borgia taught many instruments, including the accordion. I loved the Borgia home. It was a center-hall colonial with a glassed-in vestibule that contained velvet cushion-covered seats and wrought iron coat trees. I would have liked to bring a favorite book to this vestibule, taken a seat on a velvet cushion, and enjoyed a quiet hour or two of reading, especially since my favorite books at the time often featured girls sitting on velvet-covered seats reading books.

Mrs. Borgia greeted me at the door and ushered me into a sort of music room-library combo space: one of the many spacious, high-ceilinged downstairs rooms in her house. I heard distant sounds of string, possibly woodwind instruments from unseen students of Mr. Borgia's. The house was so large that there may well have been a half dozen music rooms.

A faint smell of dinner often lingered in the air. It usually smelled good, and I half hoped Mrs. Borgia would offer me a plate

of leftovers rather than watch me strap on that moronic instrument and then draw my attention to the bars of music that were no easier for me to read this week than they had been last week.

The accordion is an interesting combination of silly to look at, sillier to hoist onto one's not-yet-developed chest, and quite difficult to master. It combines the less attractive elements of piano keys, woodwind keys, and fireplace bellows, requiring coordination far beyond that of this playground and gym class spaz.

In later years, I'd watch accordion players on TV as comic figures, such as the annoying wedding entertainer or has-been vaudevillian, and I would cringe; what the hell had I been thinking? Probably that it wasn't even remotely like the flute, clarinet, piccolo, or guitar, all of which my sister played well.

Recently, however, I've noticed a trend of young women in their twenties playing in klezmer, zydeco, and bluegrass ensembles. And what are they playing? The goddamn accordion, that's what. And they're cute and sexy – lots of skimpy but cute flowery sundress and Western boot ensembles – and don't appear anything remotely like has-been vaudevillians. Clearly, I missed the boat on this one. I shared this possibility with my mother not too long ago.

"You could have been famous if you'd stuck with it," my mother said firmly. "But you dropped it, just like you dropped everything. Violin, modern dance, tennis, coin collecting."

"Coin collecting doesn't belong on that list," I said. "I never would have achieved fame and fortune from collecting coins I bought by the dozen for one dollar at the hobby shop. And regarding violin, tennis and modern dance, let's just say I know my limitations."

II. Horror

Flash Gordon was there in silver underwear. I wore jeans. Among my happiest teenage memories – there were three, maybe

four – were excursions to midnight showings of Rocky Horror Picture Show in 1977 and 1978.

Twice, I saw it at the Waverly, the Greenwich Village theater, where the witty and sharp audience participation phenomenon was born. Plus that was where I saw my first drag queens. But making the midnight scene in New York City was tough for a bunch of suburban kids. Money had to be spent, parents had to be lied to, so we traded some wit, sharpness, and drag queens for convenience.

Most often, we went to the Town 2 Cinema in New Rochelle to get our Rocky Horror fix. It was local, convenient and most of all, efficient, in that one's number of viewings of Rocky Horror were key; the closer the theater, the more frequent the viewings. Sixteen was my total by high school graduation.

I saw it twice in Queens in the early 1980s, but I do not count those viewings in my total. The pop culture references had changed by 1983, and frankly I didn't want exotic outer-borough residents becoming part of the wallpaper of my teen touchstone.

Jeans, along with a t-shirt, was my preferred style profile when viewing Rocky Horror at the New Rochelle Town 2. I looked generic. Once I half-heartedly dressed as a Rocky Horror character: Magenta, the frizzy-haired, bisexual, incestuous housemaid. (I chose Magenta because I already had the hair for it.) The smoky eye makeup, false eyelashes, purple-red lipstick, short-skirted and torn French maid uniform, fishnet stockings, and black boots sat on me with about the same degree of élan as would roller skates on a beagle.

As luck would have it, the night I chose to look like a cross dresser's nightmare was also the night that the Grateful Dead documentary opened on the second screen of the Town 2 (hence the 2) at midnight. All the suburban hippies who were way too cool for the bubblegum, porno-pop /punk soundtrack of Rocky Horror were out in force for the Dead. It didn't matter to me that

the three or four people I was with looked equally ridiculous; they didn't care, and I did.

A certain suburban hippie I knew fairly well was on line for Dead tickets. Her name was Meg and she was escorted by two guys she was sleeping with. "Purely platonically," she insisted. Meg smoked Newport Light (box) cigarettes in a plastic cigarette holder with a tortoise-shell patterned filter. Yes, I bought one. No, I never used it. I wanted purely platonic fuck-buddies. No, I never had any.

"I love your fishnets," she said enthusiastically, giving my Magenta getup the once-over.

I wore fishnet stockings then with no more chic than I can pull off now. Some girls are born to wear fishnets and others are not. Meg could have, but she wore an ancient pair of Levis, patched in places with suede, calico and other artfully curated materials, Western boots, and a leather jacket. Meg's going-to-the-midnight-Grateful-Dead-documentary-with-two-platonic-fuck-buddies outfit out-styled my punk-bisexual-incestuous-housemaid costume by a mile.

I stuck with a generic profile thereafter: jeans, t-shirts, sweaters, A-line dresses and skirts in solid colors, preferably black. No fishnets. No silver underwear, even under my jeans.



—**Barbara A. Edelman** lives in Gardiner, New York (New Paltz's sushi- & bar-deficient neighbor) where she divides her days between working as a research editor and letting the dog in and out. She spends her nights sleeping and not sleeping. Mainly not.

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