One Saturday at Piccadilly's

Barbara Echo-Hawk

On a hot summer day in 1963 my two older sisters and I got up early on a Saturday morning and made preparations to go shopping downtown. This required dressing up, and I, at eleven years old, was not as enamored with the grooming process as they were at thirteen and fifteen. Nevertheless, I removed the brush rollers from my hair, happy to be relieved of the bristles that had been pressing into my scalp all night. With the radio blaring "Big Girls Don't Cry", I teased my hair by backcombing it into knots all over, then smoothed it into a rounded bubble. The bathroom we three girls crowded into was thick with hair spray as we jostled with one another, vying for space.

Being the youngest of three girls, I had the advantage of the use of their make-up, eyelash crimpers, eyeliner, mascara, and rouge, at an age when I would not have been allowed to buy such things. When I had done all I could do, I surveyed myself in the mirror. Between my freckles and the gap in my two front teeth, I didn't see how I would ever look like Karen, who clearly bore a strong resemblance to Elizabeth Taylor. I reached into the drawer where she kept her hair ribbons and selected a thin blue grosgrain that would match my freshly ironed "shift", a simple sleeveless dress made popular by Jackie Kennedy, whom I thought to be the epitome of sophistication. I slipped into my white sandals and headed for the kitchen to eat a bowl of cereal while my sisters finished primping.

The big sprawling house seemed rather empty. I knew that Daddy was playing golf and wouldn't be home until noon or after. Passing through the foyer I looked out on our backyard and what promised to be a hot day. The sun reflected off our boat dock and Lake Austin. Often on Saturday afternoons we all went water skiing, eventually ending up at a lakeside restaurant for dinner. This was going to be a fun day.

As I made my way across the gleaming polished floors to the kitchen I could hear cartoons on the television in the playroom and knew that my little brother was in there watching Top Cat, eating fistfuls of Cheerios out of the box. Willy, our Negro maid, didn't come on Saturdays. She doted on my little brother, and many mornings as I headed to the kitchen for my bowl of Corn Flakes, I passed her in the hall as she carried a tray to the playroom, on which was placed a plate and a bowl containing a single boiled egg yolk. My brother didn't like the white of the egg. Sometimes they watched cartoons together, their laughter broadcasting the fact that Willy was not going about her housekeeping duties.

I sat in the sleek quiet kitchen and ate my cereal, being careful not to drip on my clean dress. Willy had pressed it for me the previous day. We girls were supposed to do our own ironing, but Willy loved this task. In the laundry room she sat at the ironing board on the chrome padded kitchen stool, her feet, in their plastic flip flops,

resting on the fold-out steps. In the afternoons I often heard her humming as she ironed the sheets and pillowcases and my dad's white dress shirts. She frequently had a cigarette held loosely between her lips as she went about her work, and often caught the long ashes in her hand before they fell to the floor and put them in the pocket of her dress.

I liked Willy, but I was never too sure how she felt about me. My sister CoriSue and I came only for the summers. Although she called me "Miss Barbara", just as she called my little brother "Master Todd", she never looked me directly in the eye. I was unaccustomed to being with Negroes, as the only ones I knew were the Cooper family back in my small hometown. Nine months of the year I lived with my mom and stepdad on a small farm in Kansas and attended a rural school with two to three grades per classroom. My exposure to the world outside our rural community generally happened when we spent the summers with our dad, who had moved from Washington, D.C. to Austin the previous year. The "black is beautiful" movement had hardly taken root in the North, and it certainly hadn't gotten a foothold in the South. We were taught to be respectful and use the word "Negro".

So Willy was a bit of a mystery to me. She came through the front door each morning at about eight o'clock in her white maid's dress, worked all day, and left in late afternoon, walking two or three blocks to the bus stop, where she often met up with her sister who worked for our neighbors, the Carringtons. I was vaguely aware that she had to change buses two or three times to get to her home in East Austin. Working quietly and steadily throughout the day, she seemed most content when she was humming at the ironing board.

I finished my Corn Flakes, grabbed my purse, and went out the door with my sisters. I had a few weeks' worth of allowance saved up. We walked the few blocks to the bus stop. Taking the bus downtown was an intimidating adventure for me, and I stuck close to Karen and did whatever she did. In minutes I felt wilted and sticky from the heat and humidity. The small fan in the bus only cooled the driver, and diesel fumes came in the open windows making me feel nauseated. The bus bounced and lurched along as it wound its way down Lamar Avenue, leaving behind the expansive lawns of our neighborhood. When it came time to change buses we stood in the hot sun. I desperately wanted an icey cherry Coke, and I looked forward to having lunch at the Piccadilly Cafeteria. The best thing about the Piccadilly was the multitude of choices, especially the pies.

Stepping off the bus into the glaring sun, I looked up Congress Avenue all the way to the capitol building looming large six blocks away. Jostling my way through the crowds of white and black people on the downtown sidewalks in Austin, I was wide-eyed and alert to follow Karen's every move. Had I been back home on the farm in Kansas that day, I might be riding down a dirt road in the back of a pickup truck taking a load of wheat to the grain elevator in the nearest town, which had a population of 150. The wind would be blowing my straight hair into tangles, and I would be hoping for a five-cent bottle of orange soda from the pop machine.

I felt absurdly sophisticated and tried not to crowd Karen in my effort to stay close to her. We made our way to Scarborough's to look at jewelry, to Woolworth's for make-up, then to the record shop. Karen could flip through records endlessly before she made her selection. She bought 45's, and stored them in a latching case with a handle on top. She kept the case of 45's and her record player in her closet, and when she decided to listen to music we all sat on the floor around the record player and sang along, snapping our fingers and bobbing our heads in time to "Blue on Blue", "Up On The Roof", and "Hello Stranger". But we couldn't sit still when she put on "The Twist" by Chubby Checker. We would get up and dance around her bedroom like crazy. One day in the middle of this revelry Daddy came home. He loved to dance and wanted us to teach him to do the twist. We turned up the record player, and demonstrated that you pretend that you're putting out a cigarette with one foot and drying your backside with a towel, all at the same time. This made him laugh, and he picked up the moves right away. We all danced in the foyer, laughing and twisting.

Karen and CoriSue continued flipping through records, but I was done. I didn't have a record player in Kansas, and I thought the record would probably break in my suitcase anyway. Karen finally selected "One Fine Day" by the Chiffons, which was in the Top Ten on the Hit Parade. My feet hurt and I was so hot and thirsty I couldn't stand it another minute. We made our way to the Piccadilly and blessed relief in the air conditioning

I loved watching people. Waitresses bustled around the tables collecting empty plates and refilling water glasses. Women in their dresses, seamed stockings, and high heels with matching purses carried on fascinating conversations in southern accents. Businessmen in suits and ties discussed their business affairs, slapping each other on the back, while cigarette smoke hung thick in the air.

I was just lifting the first bite of coconut cream pie to my mouth when the commotion started. I saw the cashier gasp. Her white face flushed and angry, she turned and walked quickly to the back. Conversation stopped. The clink of silverware on china stopped. The waitresses stood stock-still, pitchers in hand. My arm froze in mid-air. I looked at my fellow diners, sitting in shocked silence, their eyes riveted – on what? I turned to see.

A Negro man had entered the cafeteria. He was standing there in his business suit. I looked at him, and I looked at the angry faces all around me. My stomach lurched and tightened into a knot. What was wrong? The man took a seat at a table near the door. Low intense conversation buzzed around the room like a swarm of hornets. The couple at the table next to us stood up, leaving their laden plates, and marched out the door. Chairs scraped loudly as a few of the men got to their feet. "He can't eat here!" The Negro man sat at his table, waiting. The indignant cashier returned with the manager, a huffing sweaty man in a white short-sleeve shirt. He seemed to try to make himself larger in the way that he walked and talked, puffing out his chest, his arms swinging widely at his sides. He seemed to expect to be obeyed as he

told the Negro man to leave, but the man remained seated. The door opened and a white man with a large camera came in and snapped a picture. The glare from his flashbulb startled me.

"We need to get out of here *now*," Karen said. We gathered our purses and our shopping bags and navigated our way to the door. Out in the hot sunlight Karen made a beeline for the bus stop. I sat in confused silence on the ride home. The image of the angry faces and the sound of the indignant voices played in my head. The sight of the Negro man in his business suit sitting at the table, waiting, was burned into my brain.

The next morning my dad was reading the Sunday paper at the breakfast table. "I saw that man yesterday," I said, pointing to the front page. My dad looked from the newspaper to me and back at the photograph. His eyes widened as he read the caption.

"You were downtown when this happened?" he said with some alarm.

"We were eating lunch at the Piccadilly when he came in."

His eyes were riveted on my face as he held the newspaper in his hand. For a man with an even disposition and generally given to understatement, he was somewhat animated. Clearly, I had been part of something that quite interested him. "It's a good thing you got out of there."

"Why were they upset about it, Daddy?"

He looked at the newspaper. "They're going to have to let Negroes in, whether they like it or not. I don't want you girls to go down there again this summer."

That may have been the last time we rode the bus downtown. Marches, stand-ins, and sit-ins followed. African-American college students picketed businesses on Congress Avenue "urging integration of lunch counters." They invited Martin Luther King, Jr. to come to Austin and help them in their efforts for integration of the University of Texas, where the dorms and intercollegiate sports were still segregated. The newspaper headline read "Officials at UT Disturbed at Report Dr. King Invited".

A few months earlier, from the Birmingham jail, Dr. King had written these words: "One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judaeo-Christian heritage…"

That summer I would see other media images. In Birmingham police assaulted African American children who were my age with high-pressure fire hoses and German Shepherd dogs, dragging them off to jail. This was more than I could comprehend. In Austin more than 900 protestors marched up Congress Avenue to

the capitol building in solidarity with the National March on Washington, D.C., where Dr. King delivered his speech "I Have A Dream".

The events of that summer would have a profound impact on my life. I recognized within myself confusion and grief that the world was the way it was. I felt a growing need to understand something, I knew not what, that would make sense of not just the oppression and hate, but also of one silent resolute black man.