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Reading Classes: On Culture and Classism in America

Barbara Jensen

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Abstract
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This book is dedicated to my wonderful family members, Jensens and Mittelmans alike, and especially to my mother and father, Alice and Fred Jensen. I never had a chance to tell you how grateful I am for all you taught me.

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Reading Classes

Prologue

What Part of Fridley Are You From?

My big brother, Eddie, retired from the post office at fifty-five and had a party. He started as a mail carrier and worked his way up to postmaster. His girlfriend, Lynette, threw the party at a park in Elk River, a northwest suburb of Minneapolis where they lived. Since my husband and I had just separated, I went to the party by myself, dreading telling my bad news to my aunts and uncles. Getting married was one of the few normal things I had ever done, even if I had done it at forty, instead of twenty, in a fancy old hotel, not a scrubbed-white Lutheran church, with a judge, not a minister. My family was used to me being "different," a catch-all term in Minnesota for anything you can't say something nice about.

Eddie played rockabilly guitar at that wedding and sang "The Battle Hymn of Love," which the pianist reprised as we left the altar, deftly switching into a rocked-out bit of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy." My large extended family of Danish and German Lutherans joined me for a reception and dance in Red Wing, Minnesota, in the Summit Room of the Saint James Hotel, which had a wall of glass overlooking the Minnesota

River—not the usual American Legion or VFW halls. My cousin Dave Jensen, who lives in Fridley, another northern suburb, played real good rock 'n' roll with his band. It seemed then to me I had finally blended my two lives, my middle and working class selves.

The news of my impending divorce was going to make my relatives sad, and I didn't want that. It was only my second extended-family event since my father had died the year before. Arriving at Eddie's party, I hugged him and our younger brother, Jim. Missing my dad, I then joined three of his four remaining brothers, who looked so much like him. Jensen men are very large. They stand out and up in a crowd. Of my father's brothers, there's not one of them as small as six feet. Their noses are large and beak-like, set in faces with big angular features. They have striking blue eyes and pale skin. Their once brown heads of hair, blond when they were kids, have now turned white. When they sit down together they spread out their knees and elbows; they take up a lot of space. They are physically formidable, but this is tempered with a great tenderness of heart. Gentle giants, they always seemed to me. That day, I noticed they were getting slightly shorter in old age, their Scandinavian skin even whiter, and their blue eyes sometimes filled with tears.

"Would you tell me about the work you did when you were young, when you lived in Minneapolis?" I asked my uncles. I love to hear their stories about old Minneapolis. My father's generation of family members were the only other relatives to have lived in "The City." Uncle Gene told me he had worked with my father collecting trash when they first moved to Minneapolis (after my dad had lived with my Jewish mother in Brooklyn for five years . . . but that's another story).

"Now, Barbie, you gotta understand that back in them days, there was nothing wrong with hard work," said beefy, sunburned Uncle Gene. He had spent most of his life working for the railroad and still wore the cap and overalls. Only my uncles and aunties had retained the right to call me Barbie. At forty-nine, it was particularly odd for me to hear it, but also somehow comforting.

Uncle Donnie piped up, "Oh yeah, Zucherman, he was your dad's boss, too, Barbie. Yeah, bosses liked us plenty 'cause they got such good work out of us. You know, it was easy for us 'cause we always worked hard all our lives. We got up at four in the morning. Every day. We'd work ten, twelve, fourteen hours. Out there on the farm, Barbie, it ain't like now."

Uncle Donnie leaned back in his folding lawn chair, spilling out of it as Nordic giants do, ready to hold forth at length.

Uncle Gene cut in, and Uncle Donnie stopped without rancor: "Yeah, that's right, Barbie, some of them men weren't so reliable as us. He was glad to have us. He started us at five in the morning, but that didn't bother us none. We were used to it. We worked all morning, and then we got us some lunch."

"Oh yeah, that place there on Lake Street," Uncle Bobby cut in next, wearing his NASCAR billed cap with the adjustable plastic strap. The youngest of the three, Uncle Bobby was a farmer and a trucker who always had a big smile and a wink for children. I remembered the thrill of having him swing me up onto his shoulders and carry me around when I was little. "That one with them great hamburgers and sandwiches. Five cents apiece, Barbie. You can't even get McDonalds for that. What was the name of it?" My family always talks about what things cost, especially back then.

"Angie's?" Uncle Donnie asked, hand over his eyes to keep the sun out. "Over there on 4th Avenue and Lake Street, don't ya think?" I remembered Uncle Donnie singing soulfully with my father and Uncle Gene, their heads tilted together with the same earnest look in their eyes. I remembered the sweet cigar smoke of those long-ago holidays at Gramma and Grampa Jensen's house in Glenville, Minnesota.

"Yeah," said Uncle Gene, the best singer of them all, picking up right where he had left off. "You kids don't know about them days. But we got up every day, and whatever job we had at the time, we worked harder than anyone ever does nowadays." He shifted in his plastic folding chair.

My father, their big brother, had died the year before of a sudden and terrible cancer; we were all brokenhearted. He took his detailed stories about his life with him. When I was a teenager, battling my parents, Eddie once told me that Dad had collected trash when he first moved to Minneapolis. Later, when I asked Dad if he had collected trash, he said, yeah, because he wasn't "ashamed of hard work."

My uncles amazed me, as my father always did, with the amount of detail in their memories. The way they spoke was at least as interesting as the stories they told: piping up whenever they felt the urge, amicably interrupting and arguing with each other. The warmth and eagerness in their eyes, their honest combination of pride and self-effacing humor—all this opened my heart and reminded me of my dad. Their vivid details and

occasional moral endings ("Nobody said life was fair!") sounded so much like my father that I knew he was still alive, in all of us. I regretted the years I hadn't asked about their stories, years I had spent busy becoming something that took me further and further away from them.

Of course the aunties sat elsewhere, talking about the important stuff among themselves. You can talk with uncles without revealing anything about how you are feeling. Not so with aunties, who are tuned like hawks to feelings and the details of peoples' lives, always ready to care. I sat down with aunties Carol, Bev, and Pete. "We're just separated," I lied, and my eyes flushed with involuntary tears. Their love made me want to hope that my husband would love me again, too, the way my family loves.

Next, I met my brother's karaoke friends. Although Eddie had worked his way up from mail carrier to postmaster, he was still, culturally, almost completely a blue-collar guy, for all his New York verbal charm and wit. His friends implored me to come back for karaoke that night at Muny's, the municipal bar in Elk River. My brother was the local karaoke king, they said. I remembered the times he brought his girlfriends and daughters to see me sing and play guitar in folk-rock bands in the City. I said, "Okay," wishing I had brought evening clothes. I dreaded the long drive back to the City and out to Elk River again, but the smile on my brother's face made me determined to come back anyway.

So I asked my ex, David, to join me for the long drive back to Elk River. Though we had separated, we were trying to be nice to each other, to help each other out, and he missed my family. We drove from my house on the south side of Minneapolis, through the once-familiar northside and northern suburbs of my childhood. My father, his brothers, and his sister Mary, my godmother, had all settled north of the Twin Cities and raised families. It was cheaper to buy homes and farms there, while the southern suburbs attracted wealthier people.

At Muny's, it was clear, my brother was karaoke king. He burnt up the stage with his soulful versions of songs by Hank Williams and Johnny Cash. The crowd cheered. As usual, my brother embarrassed me by introducing me to all his karaoke friends as "my little sister, the psychologist." Nearly everyone was dressed in blue jeans, brightly colored shirts and blouses, and billed or cowboy hats. I felt a bit odd dressed in black sparkly stuff that I had bought in New York. In our usual black dress-up clothes David and I looked like FBI agents, undertakers, or, worse, city snobs.

Bringing my handsome cosmopolitan husband to family events, I had been able to feel that my own, very different, life was finally a bit visible, even enviable. David's now-temporary presence helped me feel this way again and, as always, a little cocky as well. David strode confidently to the microphone to sing karaoke, something we had previously disdained as "real musicians." A child prodigy on the piano by the age of four, he sang off pitch and didn't even know it! I couldn't help but smile a little; I had so revered his musical genius and classical training. I picked a Mary Chapin Carpenter song that I had already performed in concert and just barely made it through. We both left Elk River with a new respect for karaoke singers, more humble than when we came.

Back in Minneapolis at 2 a.m., we stopped at Little Tijuana, an all-night diner near the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. Here we blended in nicely with our arty black clothes. As always, it felt good to be back in the city, no longer different. We slid into a booth in front of a large table of similarly arty young people. I remembered how exciting it had been to be a young art student with a whole new life ahead of me. I remembered, too, my eagerness to move into the city as soon as I graduated high school. I grinned broadly at them; they smiled back. Not one of my Jensen cousins has lived in the city. Most of them would not even drive through the city. In the quiet awkwardness of "trying to be friends," while David and I waited to order, I overheard a young man from the table behind me "dissing" someone.

"So I said to him, 'What part of *Fridley* are *you* from? I mean where in *Anoka* did you grow up?'" My eyes popped wide in shock. Those were the northwest suburbs of the Twin Cities we had just driven through, where much of my extended family still lived, including the uncles, aunties, and cousins that I felt so grateful for that difficult day. Fridley is where Dave Jensen lived, Uncle Gene's son, whose excellent band played at our wedding dance. Uncle Donnie and Auntie Carol and my deceased godmother, Mary Jensen Larson, lived in Anoka.

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"Yeah," another guy joined him as our waitress came, "What rock in *New Brighton* did you crawl out from under?" New Brighton was my childhood mailing address. I skated at the roller rink in Spring Lake Park; I got my first job there in a bakery at fourteen. I sputtered through

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David dismissed them, "They're just blowing hot air. They could be talking about anything." But they weren't talking about anything. They were talking about my family. Of course, they had no idea that someone from those "low class" places was sitting in the booth behind them. In my black clothes and cat's-eye glasses, I could be one of their teachers; indeed, I do teach at a local university and have even taught art in the past. David was right, I suppose, they were only using popular idioms and insults of the day. Still, their words hit my chest like buckshot. They desecrated my family, and my heart, with their casual, playful speech.

I could still see my uncles telling their colorful working class stories. I could hear my brother belting out Hank Williams, proud to show off to his little sister, the "fancy-pants psychologist." The sweetness of my uncles, the love in my aunties' eyes, the reach beyond my own knee-jerk class prejudice against karaoke bars to hear Eddie singing and to meet his friends—all this had resurrected a deep sense of family intimacy, of belonging, again. Despite the loss of my parents and my marriage, despite all the years I aimed myself away from the life they expected of me. For a little while I had enjoyed freedom from the confusing fragility of my own uneasy psychological truce of selves: southern and northern Minneapolis, educated professional and fun-loving tough girl, professional middle class and working class.

"What part of *Crystal* are you from?" I heard. Uncle Gene and Auntie Pete lived in Crystal.

"What pickup truck in *Mounds View* did your mother drop you in?" I just popped up then and glared at the guy who was talking—Mounds View was my town. I was surprised to see he was Asian American. He was surprised I glared at him. Fuming, I walked to the restroom.

When I returned, David told me that the other guy talking was the big white guy with the baseball cap. They left as we ate our meal. When we left the restaurant, they were out front. I saw the Asian American kid again and I looked him in the eye. He looked right back at me, a wary look. Mostly, I tried to catch the eye of the white guy, to glare at him, but to no avail. His gaze didn't rest on me long enough to register anything at all. He kept on blathering as we walked away.

In the car, David told me that the white guy had done most of the talking.

As I went into my house, and David didn't anymore, I could hear the slow crunching of new tar, gravel, and our exciting cosmopolitan life beneath his tires. Tears suddenly rushed from my eyes; I fought my grief by willing back precious images of the day. Then I heard those kids talking shit about my family's hometowns, and I tried to picture the big white kid with the billed cap in my mind.

My anger came unbridled. I shouted at my house of ghosts, "What rock in Fridley did I crawl out from under? Every rock in Fridley! Every part of Mounds View, Anoka, Columbia Heights, Coon Rapids, Crystal, Spring Lake Park! *I am Fridley*!" I felt thirteen again, wishing life was simple enough that a physical fight could resolve something once and for all. Wishing my own insides were that simple.

I walked back outside and stood on my porch in the summer air. I watched David's red taillights drift away and, with them, the anchor my marriage had been. I belonged nowhere. Again. I saw the white kid from the restaurant clearly now; he was a lot bigger and beefier than the other artists, and his cap, though streaked with black and gold, had plastic nubs in back to adjust it. Just like the caps my uncles get at feed stores or Menard's. Then I realized: he looked way more like a guy from places he was slamming than the art students he was trying to impress. Bingo!

My anger deflated as suddenly as it had erupted. I knew it wasn't just the casual classism of strangers that made me so angry, but *my* classism, the years of running away. I felt shame and sorrow for the embarrassment I felt for my parents, back then, with my educated new friends. A sharp slice of memory dances in my mind, and I hear myself arrogantly correcting my parents' colorful English. I had inhaled and exhaled classism as naturally as air, as I swam ecstatically into my "life of the mind," correcting the voices I would now give anything to hear just one last time.

I stood on my porch. It was July. A north wind blew through the Mississippi River Valley, and I caught a fresh breeze on my face. I looked at the crazy patchwork life I have fashioned, belonging nowhere but also almost anywhere. I knew I would always be suspended between worlds: between Minneapolis and New York City; between theater, literature, world travel and the rooted, easy-going, and enduring pleasures of my working class life.

I stood on that porch a long, long time.

1

Getting Class

Welcome to my worlds. Both of them.

I come from a stable, solidly working class neighborhood and large extended family. On my dad's side, the Jensens, nine brothers and sisters survived to adulthood, married, and had children. I now have an extended family of over 140 people; many still get together to celebrate Christmas each year and a slew of graduations, confirmations, bridal and baby showers, weddings, anniversaries, and retirement celebrations. We still have a family picnic every summer. My family is real, funny, and wise. The uncles and aunties in my prologue started out their adult lives dirt poor and worked very hard to move on to stable, skilled working class jobs, a mobility that makes them proud.

I worked hard, too, and have also moved up the class ladder in America. But instead of going from a job in a poultry plant to a good union job as a railroad worker, a security guard, a meat cutter, or working in a school cafeteria, I worked my way through a lot of school (with a variety of working class jobs) to become a psychologist. My uncles and aunties didn't have to

change cultures to change jobs; I wandered into a whole new world where few of the rules from my first world—their world—apply. I also entered a world where people view my wise, funny, and loyal family as something quite different from what they really are.

Now I am in my mid-fifties, and I am a professional counseling and community psychologist, a university instructor, and a scholar—in short, a member in good standing of the upper middle class in America. As an official member of the professional middle class I have framed degrees, licenses, certificates, and awards displayed in my office, proving my membership. I am a working class to professional middle class "crossover" or "straddler" who really enjoys many aspects of each class-related culture I know (Lubrano 2004).

Unlike many people who have crossed this class divide, I enjoyed growing up working class and remain in relatively close contact with my extended family. I still love ball games in the street, roller-skating, playing country music on my guitar, and belting out rock 'n' roll songs. Conversely, I have developed a taste for Chilean sea bass and pine nuts, Beethoven, exotic travel, and the kind of theater that leaves many people frowning and scratching their heads.

Growing Up Working Class

My dad was a meat cutter and my mom a telephone solicitor (long before they were upgraded to "telemarketers"). Everyone we knew was working class. In my childhood, we were often driving across the state to see more relatives. With dozens of cousins, aunts, and uncles, I got to stay in many different houses, saw different ways of living, had different kinds of fun, and saw different kinds of difficulty—all of them working class. At the farms belonging to my Dad's brothers and sisters we had animals, huge fields of corn and soybeans glistening in the summer sun, barns, haymows and attics within which to play. Being one of the oldest children in the Jensen family, I often told stories to my younger cousins, as my big brother, Eddie, had told stories to me. I was as close to my cousins as I was to my neighborhood pals in Mounds View.

My big family gave me a sense that my world was very large and included more people than I could possibly count who were either related

to Dad, friends from jobs he had worked, or friends from the many places they had lived as he grew up. My childhood map of the world was mostly in Mounds View, and then mostly four streets: Pinewood, Terrace, Oakwood, and Hillview. But Dad was always driving us somewhere else, and Minnesota seemed a very big place, with endless new landscapes and towns. Glenville, where Grandma and Grandpa Jensen lived with Uncle Ricky in that long-ago little white house with a back porch and deep yard, outdoor clotheslines running the length of it. Alongside the house, there was a small hill and at the top was the railroad track, just off Main Street in Glenville. There was an outside toilet that people used even when the one inside worked. Glenville was the center of the Jensen family, way back when Grandma was still alive and I was little. We spent nearly every holiday there and all Dad's brothers and sisters and, as they were gradually added, new spouses and more cousins still went there as often as possible.

My childhood map also had two very far-away lands: Denmark, where Grandpa Jensen came from, and New York, where my mother was raised and where Grandma and Grandpa Milstein still lived. Not just New York, we knew, but Brooklyn, New York.

There wasn't much happening in our little village of Mounds View, just quiet rows of identical tract houses (there were two types, small and medium) and tiny trees planted by hopeful young couples. Now I can't help but laugh when I say the name Mounds View: there were no mounds to view. It was dead-flat prairie and even swampy in parts. There was no town center, no library, no town, actually. My best friends were Terrie Blanchard, Marie Butler, and Rene McDonough, and we had plenty of time to invent our own fun.

There were half-done housing developments to play in, mountains made of dirt to climb, big bumpy laps of sprawling old oaks we climbed into in the school yard across the street from our house, the slurpy bog you went through to get to the woods, and an even slurpier expanse of black peat to explore. We had the farmer's yard on Hillview Drive with a tire swing we loved to ride, countless games of dodgeball and statue-maker in McDonough's yard, led by Rene's older sister and brother, a record player and a passel of 45 rpm records in their basement that all of us took turns pantomiming to each other. There were countless overnights in each other's houses, and many more whispered stories and secrets between us. Things weren't always easy for our parents—some of them worked too

hard at difficult, often multiple, jobs, and every once in a while their frustrations rocked our wood-frame houses and shattered the quiet suburban air. But we were not alone in the world. We always had "us."

In our neighborhood there was one primary school—Pinewood Elementary. In first grade, kissing Mrs. Johnson's old papery-white cheek as we left school each day, I dreamed of being a teacher's pet, but I never was. I loved books, but there weren't any in our house, or in Pinewood Elementary. (They finally got a library just as I was leaving sixth grade for junior high.) My godmother's house had a piano, because their Pentecostal religion said they couldn't have a TV, and I begged my parents and pined for a piano and lessons all through grade school. I never got them. One sad lesson I learned at the time: try not to wish for things you can't have, it only makes you feel bad. As my father always said, "You can't have everything." Also, as everyone in Minnesota still says, "It could be worse."

I'm sure no one read books to me in the 1950s and '60s, because I still remember getting my first and only books in childhood. Two of them. I remember being surprised, and a bit disappointed, to open them under the Christmas tree. They were fairy tales I eventually came to adore and imitate. Mostly, I read the grisly stories in the *National Enquirer, The Star*, and *Weekly World News* at a neighbor's house with horrified fascination. I then wrote stories about mutilation and brutality, and my mother praised my writing skill. The only books I saw adults read were the Bible (and then only my godparents Mary and Milton) and what I later learned to call "potboilers," like Harold Robbins's *The Carpetbaggers* or Willard Motley's *Knock on Any Door*, that my mother read and that I eventually learned to plow through. Also, my mom made sure we always had lots of magazines.

Sometimes I awoke to Mom's sobbing in the night, "I want to go home!" I had no way to know what she meant by "home," since our house on Pinewood Drive was the only home I had ever known. I remember going into the new living room Dad had built and finding him sitting on the edge of the couch, his miserable head in his hands, until I said, "Dad?" And he looked up, surprised and, for a moment, truly lost.

"Mom's had a little too much to drink, Barbie," he said, looking like my ever-confident, competent dad again. He said, "Go to bed, it will be better in the morning." But Dad didn't look convinced. I know now that she missed New York, but then I went to my bedroom afraid and deeply puzzled, while Mom's noisy sobs shook the house.

And it would be better in the morning, and better still by Friday night when we relaxed into another long car ride and cruised up Highway 65 to the cabin. Dad bought my brothers and me a handful of candy bars to choose between, and he let us listen to rock 'n' roll on the radio. Long car rides turned quiet and intimate as we eventually lost radio reception and began to sing. Everyone had special songs to sing, and we took turns, the more tender the lyrics the better. Dad sang "Rocking Alone in an Old Rocking Chair." Mine were "Patches," a tragic tale of class prejudice, and "Scarlet Ribbons," a magical tale of a little girl whose faith brought her gifts beyond human comprehension. And when we didn't know the lyrics, we all made goofy ones up together, and we laughed out loud.

There was a spaciousness to life, and it seems to me now that people in my childhood heard *inside* of words. Words were buoys, instead of building blocks—buoys floating in a world dense with shared images: farms and factories, haymows, shanty towns, and neon city streets; cows, horses, pigs, dogs, and chickens; shining meadows, swamps, and fields of corn; dense forests of birch, pine, and oak; a wonder of pheasants, grouse, deer, moose, and black bears. The meaning in our lives changed together, like weather. Everyone in the neighborhood watched together as good times and bad times, odd times and usual times, came and went.

Then came sudden events, all in a tumble, like the Tornadoes of '65 (sixth grade) that flattened two blocks of houses. A rush of people and danger and excitement. We always knew there were frightening things beyond our understanding, beyond our control: we saw shattered houses and scattered treasures. But we already had seen hands with a missing finger, people whose faces had burn scars, animals struck and bloodied by cars, and other great, troubling mysteries of childhood. We also knew that, mostly, people like us survive. Everyone came around to help and rebuild. Eventually, those battered streets ended up having the nicest houses in the area. Then we coasted again through another endless summer.

If we were deprived, we didn't know it. Later, as an upwardly mobile young adult, I would curse and mourn the lack of good literature, art materials, and music training in my childhood, how far "behind" I felt among my new middle class friends. But, at the time, in our relatively homogenous suburb, we were unaware that anyone else had anything we did not. I enjoyed being a working class kid, riding my bike all over Pinewood and

beyond to Greenfield and Red Oak neighborhoods, making new friends and finding new adventures.

Adventures in Adolescence: Discovering Class

In junior high we got a school library, but I wasn't looking for books to read anymore. (Okay, I did sneak a few Beverly Cleary books home.) I was far more interested in getting more and more cool, as my brother Eddie had six years before me. Some of the teachers even called me "Little Jensen," remembering my brother and expecting me to be a hood too. I did not disappoint them. I exhibited bravery, sheer nerve, willingness to face consequences (detention), and humor—sometimes at the teacher's expense—in front of the whole classroom.

When Terrie, Marie, Rene, and I were twelve, we started going to Teen Night at the Bel-Rae Ballroom every Tuesday. It was always packed with kids and live bands that played songs of the '60s like "Let The Good Times Roll." "Heat Wave" by Martha and the Vandellas was the song that always made everyone get up and flood the dance floor. We freely smoked cigarettes. The management didn't even try to stop us. I don't know if I ever missed a Tuesday night from age twelve through my high school graduation at seventeen.

I was a most unlikely candidate for college.

But when I was fourteen (in 1968) an old friend from Pinewood whom we saw every week at Bel-Rae, Jeanie, started inviting me to her house. My parents' dream neighborhood had only been a stopping place for her family. They had moved into a real middle class neighborhood in nearby New Brighton—a real town with a library, a couple of restaurants, a post office, a bank, and different classes of people. Mom went there often for a "smidgen of civilization," as she called it.

On my first visit to my friend's house I had a "we're not in Kansas anymore, Toto!" experience. This house had books galore, special "reading" lamps, no TV in the living room (the object around which every living room in Mounds View revolved), and a component stereo system with no cabinet her brother had brought back from Vietnam at the end of his first tour. Her parents were divorced (that was *different*), her oldest sister was a model, and her other older sister had my name, Barbara, and went to

the University of Minnesota. Her mother was also attending the U to get a master's degree in library science. They welcomed me into their family.

My own family was in trouble. By the time I was in high school, my parents and I were fighting all the time. My mom had become increasingly dark and stormy as the years wore on in Minnesota. Six years older than me, Eddie had married his high school sweetheart and moved a mile down County Road I; he was trying to help me understand my parents. Eddie and I had many talks about our family while parked in the driveway where no one would hear us, exhaust pluming up around his car like ghosts in the winter air. Mom fought an unintelligible battle that only started to make sense when Eddie finally told me, when I graduated high school and left home at seventeen, that Mom's parents were Jewish.

Since I was not getting along in my family, I more or less took up residence in New Brighton. Staying with Jeanie's family changed the course of my life forever. In particular, her older sister Barbara reached out and brought us to the West Bank (of the Mississippi River) by the University of Minnesota campus, where she lived with other students.

The streets of the dilapidated West Bank neighborhood inhabited by skid row alcoholics and cockroaches was now packed with university students with long silky hair or gigantic tousled curls, flowing East Indian Nehru shirts and long billowy skirts of brightly colored prints. Barbara was completely at home there, with her long straight hair, blue jeans, and sweatshirts. She was a protester of the war in Vietnam, a natural foods eater, and an athlete who worked with kids every summer. She had a big and ready smile and always talked to me like I was an adult.

I remember my first night on the West Bank with her, going up a long flight of stairs in an old house to the Coffeehouse Extempore. We gave a donation at the door to a small man with black hair in two long pigtails, while I tried really hard not to stare at him. This may be hard for people born after the 1960s to imagine, but boys and men back then always had short hair. This room was full of men with long hair, women in tie-dyed clothes, cigarette smoke, and the smell of coffee. I had never seen anything like it; I was fascinated. Wandering in, I found a room where a guy played guitar and sang folk music on a small stage while people sat at tables and listened. Everyone was very friendly and sweet, loving even. This was quite different from my tough-guys neighborhood, because I was a stranger and yet they treated me like one of them (though I was only fourteen and dressed

like myself—a working class tough girl in black shorts with make up and long black wings painted on my eyelids).

Where I came from people treated me like family, but they didn't invite strangers into the community quickly. An extrovert by nature, and coming from a family that was forever visiting others, I found it easy to endlessly hang out and visit in this strange new place. Young college people were everywhere, talking about everything from politics to weaving. Jeanie and I started hanging out at Barbara's apartment; then her mom let her live with Barbara one summer, and I more or less lived there, too.

The day after my sixteenth birthday, on October 15, 1969, I marched in the nationwide moratorium against the war in Vietnam, along with thousands in Minneapolis and millions across the country. Laura Nyro was singing "Save the Children" on the radio: "Babies in the blinking sun / Singing 'We Shall Overcome'." Being welcomed into a community of bright, defiant, and idealistic young college students who believed that people could get together to change things, to stop the authorities who were sending young men to die and kill for no good reason, infused me with a sense of belonging, hope, and purpose. I was at once given an outlet for my gathering anger and embraced by a community where "all you need is love." That solidarity, the huge symbiotic wave of us—singing and chanting down power and death—that sense of belonging and hope has never left me.

Eventually, Barbara moved into a collective household where Jeanie and I were regular guests for elaborate vegetarian dinners, political discussions, a wonder of books (like *Do It!*, *Steal This Book*, *Native Son*, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, and *The Hobbit*), oil painting, another incredible stereo system, tons of underground and folk music, and all the other cool things they did. Barbara liked to tutor me in cooking natural foods, cooperative economics, ecology, and anything else. I was rapt, listening to her talk about anything—even cooking, in which I had had no previous interest. I went from being rebellious against authority in general to rebelling against more specific authorities, like the U.S. Congress and President Johnson.

My high school boyfriend, John, was from the opposite side of the Twin Cities, a much wealthier southern suburb. We had met at the Minnesota State Fair, in St. Paul. He and I embraced the counterculture together. We took my mother to task for replacing the old metal ice cube trays with plastic ones: "It *never* biodegrades, Ma! Your ice cube trays will be here

forever! Where are they going to put all this junk, Mom? The planet is filling up with plastic junk."

"Bio-de-what!?" Mom exclaimed with a wry grin. "You're telling me my buying ice cube trays is going to destroy the planet?" and she laughed in her sarcastic New York way. "Well, now that I've already bought them, should I send them to the planet to be junk? Since they're going to last forever, wouldn't it be okay if I used them for a while?" Then she laughed her husky cigarette laugh. It was hard to not laugh with her when she talked that way.

When I graduated from high school at seventeen, in 1971, my parents gave me one month's rent money to leave home and stop fighting with my mother. My idol, Barbara, went off with her guy to live on a farm, as so many of the counterculture did, along with other friends who bought land nearby. Within five months I made a year-long move to Anchorage, Alaska, with a new, older, and terribly intellectual boyfriend, where I worked in a ceramics factory and a restaurant.

Passing: Class in the Counterculture

Coming home a year later, I immersed myself in the life Barbara had had by becoming a university student and joined the heart of the counterculture by working for years in the burgeoning co-op movement of the 1970s. Those were years when grants and student loans were readily available. I attended the U of M full time studying studio art and political science, and worked at the co-op for a year without pay, while working in a downtown bakery for money. When the co-op finally was able to offer four people a very minimal wage, I felt lucky to be working in the movement for actual money. I dropped out of the U. In the co-ops, the camaraderie of being "freeks" together, practicing communal values, was not so unlike the white working class neighborhood where I grew up (though political views seemed almost diametrically opposed), which made this transition possible for me.

In the counterculture all you needed were jeans, sweatshirts, and the long antique dresses we found for quarters at a local rag store. The tribal spirit was so strong you could almost feel it embrace you. This type of rebellion was one my developing mind could embrace without having to