

## Not Nora

“Young lady, you have a rhetorical gift.” That from a man standing below the stage where I had just finished a speech to the Colorado Baptist State Convention. That year I was President of the Young People’s Union. I had no idea what the stranger was talking about, and I had to wait till I got back to Fort Morgan two days later to look up “rhetorical” in the dictionary. I couldn’t find it, so I finally asked Daddy, who said, “Try “rh.” Before I knew what it meant, however, I liked the sound of the phrase, and that night after my speech, as I leaned over to brush my long hair, I kept saying to myself, “rhetorical gift,” “rhetorical gift.”

“May I help you down?” he asked, reaching out to the edge of the stage. I leaned over and put my hands on his shoulders, and he gently lifted me up just a bit by the waist and then down onto the floor. There was something about the strength of those arms that made me glad I hadn’t shaken my head and used the stairs at the side of the stage. By then Lucy was by my side, congratulating me on not messing up, and I was off with her, tossing a thank you over my shoulder. “My name’s Ron, by the way.”

The next day I found him sitting by my side at the hymn sing. His deep bass supported the pew of sopranos he had joined. When I realized he was actually reading the bass notes in the music and not just singing the tune, I was impressed. I looked up at him to show my approval, and the way he smiled back held my gaze inside his intense blue eyes longer than I’d intended. I was surprised that he spent the day hanging around me and Lucy. We ate box lunches together, and he chose to go to the same workshops we did. By the end of the afternoon, I was not surprised when he asked if he could take me out to dinner. I told him no; Mrs. Preston would be waiting for us for supper. Lucy and I were staying at her house for the Convention.

“Oh, I know the Prestons. Let me call them. Do you have the phone number?” I fished it out of my purse and handed it to him. When we got to the phone booth on the corner, there was a dial phone, the first I’d ever seen. He whipped out a dime and started deftly rotating—click, click. There was no hesitation about this man. He could do everything. “Of course . . . By nine-thirty. . .I understand. Thanks, Mrs. Preston.”

The restaurant he took me to was in a part of Denver that was new to me. The place was dark and mysterious. There was a bar with more bottles of alcohol on the shelves behind it than I had ever seen even in the movies. He ordered one wine and one coke. I knew then he should’ve called my mother for permission and not Mrs. Preston! We both had fried chicken, and after the ice cream he put a nickel next to “String of Pearls,” and led me to the tiny dance floor beside the bar. I’d never been swept along like that before. His hand on my back told me exactly what to do. Masterful, that’s what he was. I didn’t know my feet could figure out steps so easily.

I found out a lot about Ron that night. He was 26, and I, 16. I had thought he was younger; he had thought I was older. He was a lieutenant, fresh from the Italian campaign, and if the Pacific war were over soon, he would be home for good. He told me about the beautiful white houses that stretched along the Amalfi coast. He stood up to show the way the fishermen below Sorrento spread out their nets. My questions were endless. His world was romantic and far removed from anything I had ever known. He had seen the war up close and knew what death looked like.

I returned home, and Ron’s letters started coming. They were full of wonderings about important questions: Do you ever get scared of dying? Is there any way to prevent another war? How can Europe ever recover? Where was God during the Holocaust? He

wrote me about Bonhoffer and the plot to kill Hitler. My letters back were full of banalities and trivia, but he always took them seriously and helped me sort out how to deal with such dilemmas as Mother's prejudice against the Mexicans and Daddy's prejudice against Ron.

He drove his green Nash down in time for church on Sunday mornings, bearing gifts like I'd never seen before: huge bouquets, a five-pound box of Whitman's Samplers, a satin pillow with a picture of the Brown Palace Hotel on top, and a necklace of tiny carved elephants of real ivory he had bought from an army buddy who'd fought in Burma.

On Memorial Day weekend, Ron took a room at the Bijou Hotel on Main Street and wore his lieutenant's uniform in the parade with the Morgan veterans. When he marched past Lucy and me, he looked right at me and gave a quick crisp salute. "You know, he really likes you," she said. She didn't know the half. He was so handsome in that uniform, I could hardly take my eyes off him. That weekend he took me to a tavern outside of town where, to my surprise, there was a dance floor. We jitter-bugged and waltzed and drank together—he, beer, I, coke. Everyone was impressed with his uniform. One foursome came up and thanked him for winning the war for us.

Most Sundays he had dinner at our house. The two of us did the dishes while Daddy listened to the radio. One afternoon, Ron started humming "I'll be loving you always," and he stepped up close behind me and gently pulled my hands out of the dishpan and dried them slowly with the tea towel he'd been using. Then he turned me around to face him.

Suddenly he was kissing me. Now it's not that I hadn't been kissed before, mind you. We won't even mention my first kiss--the one Reuben slammed onto my lips, paying no attention to my scream. It happened one afternoon in the narrow lay-out room where I

was alone, putting together the school newspaper. It was Albert who gave him away. He asked me the next day if Reuben had really kissed me. Then, of course, I knew it had been some silly bet the football players had made in the locker room daring Reuben to get through to the principal's daughter, which I was. I'd actually had a real kiss from Eddie after the sock hop, but his buck teeth made it hard for him to close his mouth. Then there was Bruce who always seemed so shy that I was embarrassed when he tried to kiss me.

Ron? Whoa! No trace of shyness. I felt that kiss right down through the wild bobbing of my heart to the tiptoes I was standing on. It finally hit me that I should release my arms from their tight hug, turn my head a bit and push him away, instinctively knowing this was my job, not his. By the time we were apart we were grasping shaky gulps of air. His fingers were trembling.

"Rattle some dishes," I told him, "or Mother will be in here to find out why it's so quiet." I decided to start singing. Plunging my hands back in the now slightly cooling dishwater, I knew I didn't dare start a love song. "Pardon me, boys, is that the Chattanooga Choo Choo?"

Ron chimed in "and just a trifle to spare" in such a phony southern-accented falsetto that we both laughed until we were weak. Then with teeth clamped down on the side of his bottom lip, he leaned back to stretch out the tea towel and slingshot it at my fanny. When I tried to wrestle him away I somehow sensed this might lead to another kiss, and I wasn't sure I was strong enough for that.

That summer was a marvel. He started calling me his *amata*. We saw movies at the Drive-In—*A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, *Meet Me in St. Louis*. When the pace of the film slowed, Ron carefully took both our half-finished glass root beer mugs and put them on the

tray clamped to his window. He slid from under the steering wheel to settle in for serious smooching. I liked wearing my pink sun dress so I could feel the pulses of his kisses on my shoulder.

By August he proposed. He was saving his money so he could go to Berkeley Baptist Divinity School in the fall. “With the money I’ve put away and the G.I. bill, we’ll be fine. I’ll buy you one of those spinet pianos so you can play all day.” I offered to type his graduate papers. He bought me a book on how to cook ocean fish and seafood. We both knew we’d be good at making babies. But somehow, I just couldn’t bring myself to say yes right away. As a married woman, I’d never be able to finish high school, and, besides, I had hoped to become a teacher someday. Ron talked to Daddy, and Daddy talked to me. Mother cried, and that left me with a huge lump in my throat. I was miserable.

The longer I looked toward the pedestrian world that loomed ahead—Solid Geometry, Ovid, and Bruce, who later discovered he was gay—the more appealing Ron’s offer became. Twelfth Grade just couldn’t compare to the electrifying acrid cigarette taste of Ron’s lips. By the time Japan surrendered, so did I.

On the night Mother’s Argonaut Club held its annual dinner with husbands, I hastily crammed into three big suitcases all my clothes, sheet music, and Mother’s old iron no longer needed now that she had a steam one. I grabbed the case with my portable sewing machine, kicked the dust of this hick town off my huaraches, and headed west. Ron and I harmonized love songs all the way to Denver. He had arranged for a friend of his who was the Assistant Minister at the First Baptist Church to unlock the door and perform the ceremony. Ron’s sister Linda and her husband met us with a bouquet for me to carry--

pink and white carnations and baby's breath. They were excited and we were in ecstasy. We said our vows at midnight. I wore my pink sundress.

Linda showered us with so much rice that that when Ron reached down to pick up my suitcase in the lobby of the Brown Palace Hotel, rice fell out of his jacket pocket and gave us away. Ron had tried to keep our special night to ourselves so had whispered to the clerk at the desk, but wouldn't you know? He beamed at me and said, "Welcome, Mr. and Mrs. Ron Goodman, to our bridal suite. Ron and I were embarrassed, but in a good way. We were now surrounded by strangers who had been standing nearby and were congratulating us.

When we got to our suite, I made the first long distance call of my life. The response at the other end was definitely not congratulations. Daddy was admonishing me not to let anyone know about this. He was sure he could get me back into high school as long as the news didn't get out. Mother was telling me to go right away to a doctor to get fitted for something or other. By the time the conversation was over, I too was crying. They never asked to speak with Ron

Ron taught me a lot that week—like how to order room service and dance without our clothes on.

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"Spread the cream cheese on first, Jesse. Then the shrimp and little strip of pimento."

"Mom, why do you do this? Tiffany's mom has a maid for her parties."

“Come on. Tiffany’s mother has a teaching job. This is my job. Now hurry up. They’ll be here in two hours.”

“You know what’s wrong with you, Mom?”

“I know that now is not the time to tell me. You just might thank me someday when you need to know how to put on an elegant party.”

“Are you kidding? Is this the life you dream for me?”

“Well, of course not.”

“You just wouldn’t feel useful, Mom, if you didn’t make a lot of work for yourself, now would you?” *That hurt. What if I didn’t know how to do anything else? Well, I can’t think about this now.*

The tea went well. To have wine at these Dean’s teas was Ron’s idea. The President had a conniption the first year we did it. He finally agreed if we made sure that only the faculty came, not Board members or students, that it was held off campus, and that it was called a tea, not a cocktail party, we could serve wine.

As I passed around the deviled eggs, the talk was peppered with erudition. Tillich’s “ground of being” and liberation theology figured prominently. I joined Ron who was intently engaged with the stunning new Religion and Art teacher. “Sally, this is my wife, Barbara. Honey, can you bring her a glass of wine?”

“Red or white?” I smiled.

“White’s fine. Thank you.”

When I got back she was talking about Niebuhr’s take on the role of literature in culture. I decided to plunge into those icy academic waters. “I wonder whether Niebuhr sees what the war protesters are doing as a manifestation of the social gospel.”

“Sorry. We were referring to Richard Niebuhr, not his brother Reinhold, my Dear.” *Why*

*was it I never got it quite right even after I'd tried to bone up by reading the dust jackets of Ron's books? Most of his books were pretty boring, if you want to know the truth.*

So here I was, drowning again in a pool of smart academicians—just as I did at all of our parties. Everyone was happy to gobble down my goodies, but it was clear that any input of mine would be trivial at best, and for sure, uninformed. I looked back at Sally and a wave of envy overwhelmed me. Here she was---brilliant, gorgeous, and with a doctorate. She didn't look over 25. Dizzy, I retreated to my bailiwick—the kitchen.

As always, when I felt insecure, my mind drifted to the twins fighting on the other side of the world. The pictures on TV were chilling. As I loaded the dishwasher, the image of those body bags blinded my sight. A big sigh, and I rinsed my hands and ventured back to the crowded rooms where no one had missed me. Since Ron was still talking with Sally, I did my hostess thing and went around the room introducing myself and providing seconds.

Our lovemaking was great after the Dean's tea. I was relieved that the responsibility was over, and he felt sexier after he'd spent some time talking with lovely young women. He had always been attracted to them. Of all people, I ought to know. As usual, he didn't put his pajamas back on after sex, and we cuddled until he was asleep. That's when I moved over, clicked on the switch above the cone on the black pole lamp and picked up my Betty Friedan. *Yep, she is right, that's what I am—"the comfort of my world."* *When I celebrated my seventeenth birthday by greeting our darling twins, the door to any alternative future was locked tight. What if I could never find the key?* I finally got sleepy enough to click off the light. I shivered, then slipped back under the safety of Ron's arm.

At breakfast, I ventured to say to the back of Ron's newspaper, "Those kids on Haight and Asbury are doing the right thing, you know that?"



“They think so. But aren’t they alienating as many people as they persuade?” You saw how the *Chronicle* depicted them.”

“But how will we ever get out of Vietnam if we don’t do something!”

“Well that something better be effective”

“You know I’ve half a mind to join them.”

Ron slammed down his paper. “What did you just say?”

“I said I want to join those hippies.”

“Now listen to me, Barbara. There’s nothing to stop you from raising that consciousness of yours right here at home. To do it, you don’t need to rub shoulders with all those druggies.”

“Ron, do you have any idea how good it might make me feel to find myself making a difference in this violence-ridden world?”

“You know, Honey, I’m just as much against this war as you are. How could I not be with our two sons over there facing God knows what horrors.”

“We have to do something about it, Ron. Something brave.”

“Believe me it won’t do any good to have one more person out there risking arrest”

“What if everyone felt that way?”

“Well, they don’t.”

“You didn’t stop Jeremy on Friday.”

“That poor kid. He was so devastated getting a draft card with the number 17. He’s sure to be called up.”

“Ron, I’m not sure I can take it to have all three of our boys over there.”

Ron sighed. Then he burst out, “God damn it, why did our family have to be dealt three low numbers?”

I stepped behind him to rub his shoulders and keep him from seeing my tears. “I’ve heard that the government will exempt drafting a boy who has two brothers already in the service.”

“I hope you’re right.”

That night Jessica had news. She burst into the kitchen. “I’ve been accepted. I can’t believe it.” She shoved the letter in front of my nose. There it was—early admission to the University of Chicago. She wouldn’t have to finish high school. Instead, next year she’d be a full-fledged freshman at the U. of C., the most prestigious school in the country.

“Oh, Sweetie, I am so thrilled for you. You know, of course, that this is all your own doing.”

We were hugging, then dancing around the kitchen now. “Mom, you always said I could do anything I set my mind to.”

“And I was right, wasn’t I?”

“Remember when you went to persuade Mr. Davis to let me into the calculus class?”

“Do I? He couldn’t believe it when you became his top student. You, a mere junior—and a girl at that.” I touched her nose with my finger. “You showed him, by golly.” Jessica giggled.

“Wait to tell Dad until I get him some wine and fish dip. He met with the Board this afternoon, and you know how that wipes him out.”

“I can’t wait to tell him.”

“Tonight will be a celebration. I’ll make your favorite—blueberry pie. He’ll be so proud.”

Pride was not Ron's first emotion. "What do you mean, go off next year? You can't do that."

"Ron," I said in the tone of voice I knew would make him listen. "She has a scholarship to the best school in the country. Of course, she'll go."

"You two don't know the first thing about that university. She won't be safe there."

"And just why is that, Mr. Know-It-All?"

"Enough, Barbara. I just happen to be the head of this family, and I do know a thing or two. Chicago is one of the most dangerous cities in the world, and, what's more, the U. of C. is in the middle of one of its worst neighborhoods. Kids get mugged there all the time."

"Please, Daddy, I'll be careful."

"You're barely 16--just too young. You need to be living right here—with us."

"Ron, you know who you sound like, don't you? Daddy." His face flushed so I knew I'd gotten through to him.

"I thought you'd be happy for me." Tears were in her voice.

Now you'd think one family had enough to deal with, but a few days later it was Jeremy.

Coming in the back door to the kitchen, he shouted, "Sit down, Mom, I've got news." His face flushed when he was excited—just like Ron's. I was glad he had inherited Ron's good looks, which would be a lot more noticeable if we could persuade him to cut that long wavy red hair. Too bad it wasn't his sister who inherited that.

I shoved the plate of cookies over, and he sat down. "Coffee?"

"Yeah, but you'll need some yourself when I tell you what Scott and I are up to."

"Which is?" I filled two mugs and sat.

“Tomorrow afternoon we’ll meet a bunch of other guys in front of the Draft Board office, and when the crowd of protestors are gathered and have started chanting “Hell, no, we won’t go,” we’ll all burn our draft cards—right there in front of the crowd.”

“You can’t do that!”

“They just did it in New York, Mom.”

“Are you sure you won’t be arrested?”

“No, but there will be a big group of us—more than the clinker can hold.”

“I don’t know, Jeremy. Do you think it might make a difference?”

“God, I hope so. Nothing else seems to be working.”

“Don’t take the Lord’s name in vain, Son.”

“Sorry, Mom.”

At the supper table, when Ron heard the news, he threw down his napkin, and stood up to make his point as dramatic as possible. “Good Lord Almighty, can’t you just see it on the six o’clock news: ‘Jeremy Goodman, son of Dr. Ronald Goodman, Dean of the Berkeley Baptist Divinity School, was taken into custody today after his arrest, etcetera, etcetera.’ Is that what you want, Son?”

“What he wants, Ron, is to do something courageous to stop this war.”

“And everyone in this family of mine thinks President Johnson is going to give one red hot damn about what my son does with his little draft card. You are all crazy.” He strode to the front door and slammed it so hard the crystal goblets in the china cupboard clinked. The three of us left at the table shrugged and looked at each other. Jessica rolled her eyes.

“He’s just trying to protect you, Jeremy,” I said.

“It’s O.K., Mom, but you don’t always have to protect *him*, you know. Besides, he’s just trying to protect himself.”

“No, Jeremy, it’s more than that. Protecting this family runs deep in his psyche. Your dad just can’t help himself. It’s not that he thinks you’re not capable of making a wise decision.” Then I took Jessica’s hand. “He’s already decided you should take that scholarship.”

“I know. He told me. He ordered me a catalog.”

“See? What’d I tell you?”

The next day it took all of our savings toward the new station wagon to bail out Jeremy. I decided not to rag Ron this time when he went back to smoking.

Shortly after that, I started to drive to San Francisco to hang out with the hippies at Haight-Asbury. They performed great music, even read some exciting poems, and seemed very happy. I found myself dancing with perfect strangers, and I wasn’t even embarrassed.

A band of scraggly guys about my age surrounded me one day talking about making love, not war. One of them propositioned me as he planted a hard kiss on my mouth. “What’s wrong? You’re spooked by a little sex? We can cure you of that.” His breath smelled like spinach boiled in vinegar. I wondered if he’d kissed me on a dare.

“Leave me alone,” I shouted loud enough for the group nearby to hear. They rescued me from those out-of-control rowdies and let me spend the rest of the day with them.

The next Sunday I wore my hippie headband around my forehead to church, trying to make a statement about this war. I knew I didn’t dare look at Ron in the bass section of the choir. He would be going up in flames.

That day was actually the beginning of the dissolution of our marriage. Mind you, we had a good marriage when the kids were little. Ron read to me or jiggled one twin on his shoulder while I nursed the other. We tussled with the babies under lines of diapers drying in our student Quonset hut. When our dueted lullabies finally succeeded with both babies at once, we pounced on each other with pent-up passion. All was sweet chaos wrapped in song.

But now Ron just couldn't abide the thought of me down there on the street with those flag-burners. You could tell that in his prayers. I began my prayer asking, no pleading really, that God protect our two boys and all those brave lads fighting over in Vietnam. Then I asked that I might be used by God to help bring peace. Ron, on the other hand, thanked God for Baptists across the land who raised their voices in words and song in praise of the glory of God.

My problem now wasn't that Ron didn't try to understand me. God knows he tried, but I have to admit that really listening to me was not his greatest talent. He decided I was confused, and possibly demented. Confused I was, demented, no.

I started getting up in the morning and doing what I most wanted it to, not just what the family needed. And I didn't even feel guilty. I cooked stews in the crock pot instead of labor-intensive four coursers and started using those little biscuits that come out of cardboard cans. I found places to buy deserts I didn't have to bake and laundries for shirts I didn't have to iron. I began work toward my GED. I had heart-to-hearts with other women, and not just Baptists either, but Catholics and Unitarians—even Jews. I joined the League of Women Voters and a Great Books discussion group. In the library I scouted about for alternative lives for myself and often joined the war protesters. I discovered some people, especially the young girls on Haight-Asbury thought it was cool that I was

wearing a shirtwaist dress rather than the outfit *de rigueur*—a gypsy skirt and beads. I wore the headband for identification, but I wanted those kids on the street to know that it wasn't just young people who were opposed to this insane war. Also, dressing my age helped me steer clear of the drug-addled crazies. The day I was hoisted up to the makeshift platform behind a microphone, crowd silenced in front, I felt like I was in the right place.

One night when the kids were gone, Ron sat me down to tell me that he had checked with a Family Counseling Center in San Francisco, and he found a psychologist he felt would be right for me. He was far enough away from the campus that no one we knew would need to know. He was sure this Dr. Dye could help me sort out my problems.

"This way you won't have to tell the ministerial students that their Dean is having marital troubles, right?"

"Now what's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean is this Dr. Dye a marriage counselor?"

"Oh, come on, Sweetheart, this isn't about our marriage."

"No, this marriage is working just fine and dandy for you. But the truth is, Ron, it's not working for me."

"Just try out Dr. Dye, please, Honey."

"No, but I'll find us a good marriage counselor; then we can both tell him our problems."

"That's the silliest thing I've ever heard. Come on to bed, Barbara. We're both too tired to keep this up." He came to my chair and tenderly took my hands and helped me to my feet. With his arm around me as I sniffled back my tears, we headed down the hall.

“We need to stop, Darling, before we say something we’ll regret.” It was clear he thought I already had.

Ron started taking us all out to dinner more often in an attempt to lighten my housework. He treated me like I was sick. Truth to tell, I’d never felt more energized in my life unless it was that magic summer when we first met. Ron tried to stifle his sigh when I asked him if he wanted to hear about my day. When I started on the details, he nodded his head sideways at Jessica suggesting this might not be appropriate for her ears. Imagine that! I might be a danger to my own daughter! Jeremy, on the other hand, provided real support. He winked and gave me a thumbs-up.

I tried to get Ron to understand my plight. One night as I sat in the rocker behind him in his study, looking at his broad shoulders hunched over the desk, I said, “Let me read just a paragraph to you from *The Second Sex*.”

He didn’t turn around. “See this stack of papers? They are the recommendations from the Tenure Committee. I have to study them and get back to the Committee with my decision by 9:00 in the morning. Some other time, O.K.?”

“Hey, Ron, I’m not asking for much of your time here. You just need to listen to me for a change.”

Ron turned around and faced me. “Listening is all I’ve been doing today, Barbara, and let me tell you it hasn’t been easy.”

“I understand.”

“No, you don’t. You have no idea. I’d have finished this stack of applications this afternoon if I hadn’t had to listen to a cockamamie proposal your buddy Hank wants to bring to the student government tomorrow. It took me all afternoon to talk him out of it.”

“What do you mean, ‘my Buddy’?”



“Hank told the whole student delegation he came in with that my wife was out there on Asbury yesterday with a group of our grad students. He told me you were even holding up a banner. That kind of thing is just what the TV cameras will love to pick up, and you know it.”

“And what if they do?”

“Can’t you see anything? It’s like I was telling that group of crazy students this afternoon. If they go to the *Chronicle* with their rabid anti-war declaration, we’ll never be able to get the Baptist churches around here to take on our men as ministerial interns. And then where will we be?”

“We might just be closer to stopping this war!”

“Talk about naïve! Sometimes, Barbara, you sound too stupid to be believed.” He wheeled his desk chair back to his papers.

I swallowed the lump in my throat, determined not to cry. That would only confirm his suspicion that I was in need of a shrink. What I did understand now was that Ron’s “To Do list” was never going to have my name at the top. I went back to Beauvoir.

“You know those French existentialists are all atheists, don’t you, Barbara? They’ll just mess up your mind.”

I don’t think Ron felt threatened by my strange new persona; he was way too confident for that. He just hoped the new me would go away. Besides, I have to admit he *was* preoccupied. The students at the Divinity School were asking for the right to protest on campus, and the President and the Board were pressuring Ron hard to keep the lid on. It was not an easy time to be a Dean, even at a Divinity School. I could get that, but he just couldn’t get what I was up to. And truth to tell, I wasn’t sure what that was myself.

I wasn't Nora, and this was not a doll's house. I didn't slam the door on this marriage. It was more like I started backing out of it. It wasn't his fault, I mean that. He was a good man and he didn't deserve this. It was just that I was a Sleeping Beauty who woke up too late only to find out I'd slept through who I really was. I was desperate to make up for lost time.