

CHRONICLES OF A RADICAL HAG  
(*with Recipes*)

ALSO BY LORNA LANDVIK

PUBLISHED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS

*Best to Laugh*

*Mayor of the Universe*

*Once in a Blue Moon Lodge*

# Chronicles of a Radical Hag

*(with Recipes)*

**A NOVEL**

LORNA LANDVIK



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*To all dreamers and doers*



# PART ONE





# 1

## **July 15, 2016**

Minus what that vicious lying mirror tells me, and the knees that crackle like kindling every time I take the stairs, and the ear canals that have muddled with silt of late, eighty-one feels an awful lot like twenty-nine. Okay, maybe fifty-three.

“You don’t stop laughing when you grow old,” George Bernard Shaw is credited with saying. “You grow old when you stop laughing.”

If I liked those cutesy pillows cross-stitched with pithy sayings, I’d cross-stitch what Mr. Shaw said on one, but I don’t, so I won’t. It’s not as if I’ll forget something I agree with so completely; really, I believe laughter is like collagen for the soul. I myself try to have a good laugh at least once a day, although in these trying times we’re living through, I wish there were a product, a “laffative” of sorts, I could take to ensure mirthful regularity.

Having survived the hoopla of last year’s surprise party, I chose a quieter celebration yesterday with my friend Lois, one that included a drive by the construction site of the new downtown library (bigger than the old one by 3,000 square feet!) followed by dinner at Zig’s Supper Club, even though Lois wanted to go to that big chain restaurant out on the highway because they have two-for-one margaritas on birthdays.

“They can afford to do that,” I told her, “because they pay their workers so poorly.”

Lois rolls her eyes as a default expression in response to much of what I say, but honestly, if I weren’t around acting as her social conscience, she would always choose a free drink for herself over fair wages for the bartender pouring it.

My grand-niece Angela—she’s the adventurer who’s living in Paris and rides a little scooter that takes her along the Seine to her Pilates studio—sent me a lovely card, whose message was written in French because, well, she’s in France.

“Joyeux Anniversaire!” are the words in the cat’s thought bubble, and when you open the card, “le chat” is drinking champagne with a group of mice, one of whom (according to Angela’s handwritten translation) is saying to another, “Drink up. Tomorrow the party’s over and it’s back to the same old cat and mouse game.”

It’s funny in that esoteric French way, *je suppose*.

Our server, guaranteeing himself a big tip, asked me to what I attributed my youthful appearance. Not wanting to give him a glib answer like Oil of Olay or “a diet of younger men,” I expounded on the restorative power of humor.

“And curiosity,” Lois said when I finally took a break to attend to my gin gimlet. “Haze here is the most curious person I know.”

She was treating me to dinner, but this pronouncement was a little gift itself.

“Thank you, Lois,” I said, and to the server I added, “I just want to know more.”

More about him (he was studying environmental science at Bemidji State and was going to spend half of his senior year on the Galápagos Islands!); more about the couple whose heated argument about her out-of-control shopping and his inattention rose from their corner table like a storm cloud; more about Lois’s date with her chiropractor’s father, and whether she’ll now be getting free adjustments.

As a gangly kid, I'd position myself on my sister Vivienne's bed, my finger idly tracing the patterns of the chenille bedspread while she sat at her desk writing love letters to her beau overseas. Before putting pen to paper, she always spritzed the thin airmail stationery with Jungle Gardenia perfume.

"It brings me close to him," she would say. "Harold can hold the paper to his nose and pretend he's holding me."

How did she know how to do something like that, I'd wonder, to send along with her words a little bit of herself to her boyfriend dodging torpedoes in the Pacific?

Vivienne's been gone for over ten years now, and my visits to Harold are getting harder and harder as he falls backward into that black hole of Alzheimer's, but I'm always heartened to see on his bedside table, along with the family Bible he can no longer read, a half-empty bottle of his wife's Jungle Gardenia.

Oh, pooh. This was supposed to be a celebratory column, and here I am doing what I've promised I won't do in my dotage—which is not to *be* in any kind of dotage!

## July 18, 2016

DEAR READERS:

It is with great sadness that we here at the *Granite Creek Gazette* announce that Haze Evans suffered a massive stroke on Saturday evening, shortly after viewing a production of *Guys and Dolls* at the newly refurbished Lakeside Playhouse. After the show, she complained of a headache to friends but, typical of her generous spirit, made a point of assuring them it had nothing to with the actors' performance.

On the car ride home she slumped forward in her seat and was driven immediately to the hospital, thankfully just two blocks away.

Haze was hired by my grandfather ("one of the smartest moves I ever made," he told me more than once) and wrote her first column in 1964. I can't count how many people have

told me her columns are their favorite part of the *Gazette* or how they consider her a trusted friend. She still receives the most mail, snail and electronic.

Haze has done much for our community, and it is our fervent hope that she will soon recuperate and continue to do more. We'll keep you posted.

Sincerely,

Susan McGrath

Publisher

"THE PHONE'S BEEN RINGING OFF THE HOOK," says Shelly Clausen, the newspaper's receptionist, her voice weary, as if she'd been toting barges and lifting bales instead of punching buttons and taking calls.

"I figured it would be," says Susan. "There's no one people care more about at this paper than Haze."

"It's beyond me," mutters Shelly, jabbing a lit-up square on the phone console and barking, "Granite Creek Gazette."

In the hallway, the publisher accepts a hug from Mitch Norton, the managing editor, who considers it part of his job description to always be the first one in the office.

"As you can hear, Smiley's got her work cut out for her," says Mitch, who has a host of nicknames for the dour receptionist.

The day before, just past dawn, he had been arranging his fishing lures in his tackle box, preparing for a sweet Sunday morning in his boat (he jokes that while his wife, Lucy, is a devoted member of St. John's by the Lake, he prefers to worship *on the lake*), when Susan called him with the news of Haze. Shifting into management mode, Mitch appeared at the hospital twenty minutes later, armed with a thermos of coffee.

"By the way," he says now, "Lucy and her garden club are wondering if they should send flowers, or would Haze even be aware of them?"

Susan shrugs, wincing as the buckled strap of her heavy bag digs into her shoulder.

“I don’t think you can go wrong with flowers.”

In her office, she shuts the door and sags against it, the energy she had summoned to get herself out of bed and to work used up. Staggering to her desk like a marathoner nearing the finish line, she collapses on the old office chair that had belonged to her grandfather. Its black leather is so worn and cracked that it’s pale gray at pressure points, and a brocade throw pillow gives her the cushion its deflated seat cannot.

It’s been a long weekend of snarly telephone conversations with a husband whose title may soon include “ex,” of sullen texts from one teenaged son and an e-mail request for money from the other, with a hospital vigil and conferences with doctors, with the shock that she might lose not just the newspaper’s institution but her dear friend Haze.

Even though it’s squeaky, the chair is made so well that it still tilts back easily, and Susan rests her head in the basket of her entwined fingers and perches her crossed ankles on the desktop (her assistant, Caroline, once rightly noted that few women are able to relax in that classic executive pose, mainly because too few women are executives). The position, however, is not helping to generate any deep thinking; her thoughts are like fleas, jumping directionless, with no intention but to irritate. She is so rattled that in response to the short knock on the door, she nearly yelps.

“Susan,” says Caroline Abramson, entering her office. “OMG. Are you all right?”

The chair squeaks as Susan flexes herself into a fully upright position.

“From the tone of your voice,” she says to her assistant, who despite her occasional abbreviated text talk, is smart and canny and, best of all, *helpful*, “I gather you think I don’t look so hot?”

“Forget hot—you look terrible.” Caroline sits down and opens her iPad. “So what do you need?”

“Whoo. That’s a loaded question.”

Caroline levels a gaze at her. For being so young (twenty-six), she’s a master at leveling gazes.

“Let’s start at the beginning,” she says. “First of all, any new news about Haze?”

Susan shakes her head. "I'm going to stop by the hospital after work. Unless I hear something before." She grimaces, not liking the implication of the word *something*.

"I'll go with you," says Caroline.

Bowing her head, Susan presses a thumb and forefinger against the rise of tears in her eyes. For the past thirty-six hours, she has been on the verge of tears, has passed the verge of tears, but as yet has not had the full-bodied cry fest into which her body and soul are ready to surrender. It would be so easy to give into it now, but there is too much to work to do.

Lifting her head slowly—it feels as if her skull were made of lead—she settles her filmy gaze at her assistant, whose warm and questioning face almost triggers a sob, but instead, Susan clenches everything that needs to be clenched and says, "I just can't believe it."

Caroline's head bobs in a nod. She too feels like crying but understands that it would be engaging in an unending game of tag—"You're it!" "No, you're it!"—that her boss does not want to play.

"So," she says, "you last saw her at Happy Tea. She was fine there?"

Susan's smile surprises herself. It's an expression that hasn't been in frequent rotation lately.

"When wasn't Haze fine?"

IN THE TUMULT OF THE LATE 1960S, the atmosphere in the newspaper office had become so rancorous (Betsy Colvin, the features editor, and Roger Czielski, the metro editor, regularly exchanging names like "Fascist" and "Bleeding Heart Ignoramus") that Haze had initiated in the conference room a Friday afternoon "Happy Tea," whereby staffers were encouraged to enjoy cheese and crackers, a selection of teas Haze brewed up in the office kitchen (by the third week, Bill McGrath had contributed two bottles of brandy, and Ed Dyson, the sports editor, had found an enthusiastic audience for the elderberry wine he made in his basement) as well as civil, and *only* civil, conversation.

"I don't mind debate," Haze had written in her interoffice memo, "but I do mind not giving each other simple courtesy."

It had been a big hit and went on for several months in the conference room until the cleaning crew complained that it was getting harder and harder to get the wine stains out of the carpet, and a suggestion was made that Happy Tea transfer to the nearby Sundown Tap.

Just as her mother, Jules, the original proprietor, had done, Chris Johnston still brewed a pot of nearly superfluous tea for the newspaper group who gathered every Friday after work, and it was she who greeted Susan and Haze at the Happy Tea just three days ago.

"Is this it?" she asked as the women settled into the center of the big, red semicircle booth. "Where's Mitch? Dale? Caro—"

"Seems everyone else has other plans," said Susan.

"Which means more scintillating conversations for us," said Haze. "As well as appetizers—Chris, why don't we start out with the CheeZee Bites—and by the way, I love the way you've done your hair. You look just like that woman in the insurance commercial."

Susan was once again amazed at the older woman's ability to give the perfect compliment. With her new updo, Chris *did* look like the woman in the ubiquitous ads, and Chris blushed, obviously pleased with the comparison, enough so that she announced the CheeZee Bites were "on the house." But a free appetizer was superseded by what Susan considered the real highlight: an hour of Haze all to herself.

As always, the columnist asked about Susan's boys.

"Jack's been pretty good about e-mailing," Susan said of her eighteen-year-old, who'd just left to spend his "gap" year traveling abroad. "He's only been gone a week, but I've heard from him four times already. Nice long e-mails too. He's *loving* London. He says he's got the "tube system" down pat."

"And Sam?" Haze asked, to which Susan shrugged.

"Honestly, Haze, he's either mad or sullen or eating a whole quart of ice cream."

"Well, he is a teenaged boy."

"He's taking Phil's and my breakup a lot harder than Jack is," she

said and sighed before shifting the conversation to safer territory, to gossip about co-workers and mutual acquaintances: did Haze know, for instance, that Stanley Walpole, the bank president, had gone down to Minneapolis for a hair transplant *and* a tummy tuck?

"A tummy tuck! I didn't know men got tummy tucks."

"I read somewhere that men are having more plastic surgery than women," said Susan, pouring into her cup of tea a dribble of bourbon from the shot glass Chris had delivered. "Things like calf and bicep implants. No matter how old the man, he still wants to show off his muscles."

"No matter how old the woman," said Haze, "she still wants to show off her sex appeal. That's why I got my boob job when I turned seventy-five."

They laughed (the only time Haze subjected her body to a plastic surgeon's knife was to remove a mole on her shoulder), and Susan confessed that it was her goal to age as well as Haze.

"Age," said Haze. "I hate when that word's used as a verb. People don't describe kindergarteners as 'aging,' and yet we all are, I suppose, from the moment we're born."

When the Sundown Tap's most popular appetizer was delivered, conversation became secondary as they attacked the worth-every-calorie deep-fried cheese curds.

"Oof," said Haze, finally sitting back in the booth and holding her hands up in surrender. "Do not let me touch another one of those."

Susan pushed to the table's edge the small platter, whose two remaining CheeZee Bites slumped in sloughs of grease. "Out of sight, out of mind."

"Speaking of 'aging,'" said Haze, "did I ever tell you your grandfather wanted me to go into syndication?"

Susan in fact had heard this story but was always delighted to hear Haze's reminiscences about the newspaper—especially ones that had to do with her grandfather. She said, "Tell me more."

"He sent samples of my columns to a couple syndicates," said Haze. "One said, 'Too regional and *way* too confessional,' and another said, 'Is she trying to be Erma Bombeck or H. L. Mencken?'"

"Frankly, I was glad, and told Bill I didn't want him to query any



others because I thought syndication would have changed the way I wrote. I never wanted to sit down at the typewriter and worry about things like subscription demographics or tailoring my columns to this audience or that audience. I just wanted to write what I wanted to write.”

“Okay,” said Susan, “but just for clarity’s sake, how does ‘aging’ fit into the topic of syndication?”

“Well, syndication would have given me more power, and power is one of the many things you lose when you get old.” After a big sigh, Haze shook her head. “I guess I’ve just got the birthday blues. I’d like to think I’m not getting older, that I’m getting better—but am I? It’s hard to think so when the world has such fixed opinions about older women.”

“The world’s going to *fix* their opinions about older women after the election,” said Susan, a tease in her voice. “With our first female president!”

“That’s right,” said Haze, brightening. “When the Nation of Pantsuits rises up and demands to be counted!”

“I ALWAYS LIKED READING HAZE’S COLUMNS,” says Caroline after hearing about the Happy Tea. “But now I want to go back and read a bunch more of them.”

“I know,” says Susan. “I’ve read every one since I started working here, but I’ve still missed years’ and years’ worth.”

Their eyes widen as the lightbulb of an idea switches on for both of them.

“Let’s go in the archives and read them,” says Caroline, fingers moving on her keypad.

“No, not online,” says Susan, as she stands. “Let’s go into the real archives—Haze’s office. She’s saved *everything*.”

OPENING THE BOTTOM DRAWER of one of several wooden file cabinets that crowd Haze’s small office, Caroline says, “1964 to 1966. I guess it all starts here.”

They unload the drawer and carry its contents into the conference room.

Seated at the long table, Susan takes out the manila folders that fill a speckled brown accordion file, and as she opens one, her eyes fill with tears.

"It's Haze's first column." She unclips an inch of papers attached to it. "And all the reader responses it got."

She passes half of the letters to Caroline, who peers at them like an archaeologist examining ancient papyrus.

"They actually *mailed* these?"

"That's what people did," says Susan. "They sat at their desk or kitchen table with pen and paper and *wrote*." She thumbs through the pages of onion skin, of flowery note cards, of monogrammed personal stationery. "And then they addressed an envelope, put a stamp on it, walked to the corner mail box, and dropped it in."

"So much *effort*," says Caroline.

"Oh my gosh," says Susan. "Here's a letter from the mayor at the time. Waldo Albeck. He wishes Haze good luck and hopes that she'll focus on 'the column-worthy business opportunities here in Granite Creek.'"

The conference room clock ticks away as they read letters written fifty years ago, grumbling about or praising the new columnist.

"I love all the different handwriting," says Caroline, when she gets to the last of her pile. "It sort of makes you know the letter writer a little better." She brushes her fingers along the engraved name on a piece of thick vellum stationery. "Like this, from Mrs. Paulette VanderVerk. I've never seen such beautiful handwriting."

Susan's shoulder presses against Caroline's as she leans in to look.

"It is pretty. And so was she. I remember her and her husband—he was a judge—visiting my grandparents. She had white-blonde hair that she wore in a French roll, and the pointiest-toed high heels I'd ever seen." She looks at the letter. "What's she say? Was she on the 'Yay, Haze!' or the 'Boo, Haze' side?"

"Yay," says Caroline.

"Most of the women were. Which makes sense, I guess."

It is past noon by the time they finish reading the contents of the first file, and the growl in Susan's stomach reminds her that eating hasn't been a priority in the hurly-burly of the past few days.

It reminds her assistant too, who asks, "Should I run to Rudolph's for some sandwiches?"

"That sounds great." She threads her fingers together and with her palms facing the ceiling, lifts her arms, her stretch long and luxurious.

As Caroline gets out her phone to call in their order, she asks, "So, turkey, tuna salad—"

"Oh my God," Susan says, dropping her hands to cap her head. "I just had the greatest idea."

## 2

**July 16, 2016**

EDITOR'S NOTE:

In her career, Haze Evans has won a fair number of prizes and accolades, but they were all “piffle” to her. Two years ago, I told her I was planning a big to-do to celebrate her fifty years’ writing for the *Gazette*. It was a to-do on which she put an immediate kibosh.

“All I need,” she said, “is for you to keep running my columns.”

That’s what we’re going to do.

After five decades, Haze’s columns still generate considerable reader feedback, but we were unaware of the volume of reader responses her long-ago columns inspired. Haze has kept meticulous files on every column, from readers’ letters (noting which ones the paper printed), to interoffice memos. Until Haze can write for us again, we will be printing her old columns on a daily basis. Occasionally, we will include some of the letters readers wrote her in reaction to a particular column. Following is the very first column she wrote for the *Granite Creek Gazette*.

**April 27, 1964**

*Cheerful Greetings, Readers!*

I was thrilled when the peach organza prom dress I sewed won a blue ribbon at the statewide 4-H Career Day

competition, thrilled when I graduated UND with a degree in journalism, and thrilled when the *Gazette* hired me away from the *Fargo Forum*. To be thrilled is a lovely state of being, one that I again find myself in now that I'll be writing a biweekly column!

Every year my bachelor uncle Ralph brought a different date to our family's holiday table, and one memorable Thanksgiving he was accompanied by Carol Bergeson. *Carol Bergeson!*

Thirteen years old and a recent graduate to the grown-ups' table, I was not only beside Miss Bergeson but *beside myself*. She may not be as well known here in Minnesota, but in the Dakotas and states west, she was the reigning Queen of the Rodeo, and throughout the passing of mashed potatoes, turkey, and candied yams, I deliberated over what sophisticated and witty words I might say to impress her.

"I saw you at the Dunn County Fair," I finally offered, watching her drizzle gravy over her generously filled plate. "You were wearing lots of fringe."

"I *always* wear fringe, darlin'," she said, "except at the dinner table, where it can get a little sloppy."

She was the nicest woman, with a big laugh and a headful of wild red hair, and she regaled us with tales of bucking broncos and rodeo clowns with drinking problems. Moreover, she had all the time in the world for a strangely pale teenager who thought she'd hidden a pimply chin and forehead with liberal pats of her mother's powder puff.

Uncle Ralph always whisked his dates away directly after dessert, not wanting, I suppose, to be part of the familial loosening of belt buckles, burps, and other noises repressed (and unrepressed), and when they were leaving, Miss Bergeson shrugged into her luxurious dark fur coat and pulled me toward her.

"Now remember, Haze," she whispered. "Everybody told me little girls didn't grow up to be rodeo stars. But I

didn't listen to 'everybody'—I listened to myself. If you want something, chase after it, rope it, and pull it in!"

It is advice that has served me well, and after Walter Peterson announced his retirement, I thought, "That's something I want—his job! And so after it I went."

"Why should I give a features writer her own column?" asked Mr. McGrath, this paper's publisher. "A features writer who's only been with the *Gazette* for a year?"

"Because I love a good story," I said, practically ejecting from my chair. "I love hearing them and love telling them. And besides, I did a little research, and the *Gazette* hasn't had a female columnist since Ethyl's Kitchen Nook—and that was ages ago!"

"I believe it's been four years since Ethyl took her retirement," said Mr. McGrath, who went on to tell me how Ethyl had a point of view and how people who read her columns knew they were going to get tips for making moist pot roast and cute stories about who first dared to add grated carrots to their Jell-O salad.

"Just like with Ramblin's by Walt, they knew they were going to get a sportsman's slightly curmudgeonly view of the world as well as how the fish were biting on Flame Lake. What will they know they're going to get with you?"

"Who knows? We'll discover it together! I'll write what moves me, what riles me up or makes me sad, and just look at it from a business perspective—a column by a woman who could be the granddaughter of the columnist she's replacing—well, it could bring in not just younger subscribers but more women subscribers!"

The silence that followed was Grand Canyon-size deep, finally broken by the muffled rat-a-tat-tat of the pencil Mr. McGrath tapped eraser-side down on his desk blotter, and just as I thought he was going to tell me to get out of his office and pack up my desk, he sighed.

"All right. Have your first column on my desk Monday

morning. I'll give you a six-week trial run to show me what you've got."

So that's why I've written about Thanksgiving at the end of April. Because I'm really grateful.

Here we go. Wish me luck!

**4/28/64**

**Interoffice Memo**

FROM: JOAN DWYER

TO: HAZE EVANS

Haze—Thought you might be interested in your predecessor's reply to your column. Don't tell my boss I let you see this!

Bill—

What the hell was that? Maybe it should have been *you* who retired, because no offense, it looks like you've lost the discernment and taste that used to hold you in good stead as a newspaper man. What's with all those direct quotes—did you really say that stuff? And where was the blue pencil that should have cut this piece in half? The readership that I spent nineteen years building is *not* going to be happy with this shit! Send this twerp back to writing features on bridge parties and weddings!

Walt

P.S. And "Cheerful Greetings"? Here's my idea for her column name—"Puking on Paper."

P.P.S. Did you really call me curmudgeonly?

Susan had chuckled, imagining the office subterfuge of her grandfather's secretary passing on Walt's snide note about his successor, but out of all the correspondence Haze had paper-clipped to her column, she chose to publish only one response.

4/28/64

TO THE EDITOR:

My aunt gave my husband and me an “introductory” subscription to the *Granite Creek Gazette* when we first married. I always thought it was sort of cheap of her, because the “introduction” only lasted a month. What did that cost her—three dollars? But it was enough that we’ve kept up the subscription and the marriage (ha ha). My husband huffed and puffed while reading the new columnist (he *loved* Ramblin’s by Walt), calling it a bunch of claptrap, but from what I’ve read, I hope she passes her trial run!

Sincerely,

Can’t Use My Name Because My Husband Would Be Mad

“Then ditch the rat bastard,” mutters Shelly. One of the many names Susan and Mitch call her is the Master Mutterer, although never to her face. Shelly does not go in for teasing, jokes at her expense, or heaven forbid, the tiniest inkling of what might be considered criticism. The area around her desk is carpeted in eggshells, or it seems that way, judging from the way everyone tiptoes through the reception area.

“She scared me half to death when I came in for my interview,” Caroline once told Susan.

“She scares everybody,” Susan had said, and even though she looked forward to the day when Shelly *finally* decided to retire, she was fond of the crotchety woman, who was one of the few holdouts from when her grandfather was still at the paper.

Now on her third Tums of the morning, trying to soothe a stomach agitated by a constantly refilled coffee cup and her own foul mood, the receptionist turns to the comics on page 12B. She supposes she feels bad for Haze, but not as bad as those who’d been fooled—unlike herself—by Haze’s friendliness and bonhomie. It was her bitter joke that amid an office full of reporters, she was the only one who knew Haze’s real story.

Shelly was hired in 1971, two days after her twenty-first birthday



and exactly one month after she'd found scrawled on the magnetized refrigerator pad a note from her husband that read, "Bye Bye! I'm out of here—for good!" Shelly let herself believe for a few moments that maybe it was an April Fools' joke, even though it was already the fourth of the month, but the fantasy was short-lived when Ray called her that evening and offered an elaboration.

"I just got tired of you holding me back, Shel," he said from a pay phone in Des Moines. "Everything I wanted—from getting a little lake cabin to buying stock in General Mills to partnering up with Vern Anderson in his custom motorcycle business—you called a pipe dream. Your big problem, Shel—but it's no longer mine—is that you've got no imagination!"

Curling up like a salted slug, Shelly felt as if she were going to die and was surprised to find, by the sheer act of waking up the next morning, that she hadn't. Her first order of business as a jilted wife was to cut out pictures from the newspaper and *Life* magazine and use them to deface every photograph of herself and the rat bastard, starting with their Vegas wedding picture, in which they posed underneath a trellis threaded with plastic morning glories, he in a rented tux with a pink ruffled shirt, and she in the prom dress she had worn just months earlier.

"Is this imaginative enough for you?" she muttered, after gluing Steve McQueen's face over Ray's.

She smudged beads of Elmer's Glue on the back of a cutout cow's head and carefully pasted it over her own in a picture of her and Ray at a picnic table.

"So now you've got a thing for heifers, huh Ray?"

She found pictures of a heavily bearded gentleman, a basset hound, and an old woman with no teeth; these were all carefully pasted over her own countenance so that it appeared her rat-bastard husband had extremely bad and sundry tastes in partners. In other photos, the faces of movie stars were pasted over his, so that she appeared to have excellent taste.

She made a little album out of these reconstituted photographs, tying curly ribbon through the three holes she had jabbed into the construction paper with a paring knife, and kept it on her bedside

table for years, until it was destroyed by a spilled rum and Tab, one of the three or four with which she tucked herself into the night.

SHELLY PICKS UP THE RINGING PHONE and in a voice pickled in vinegary sweetness agrees with the caller that yes, running Haze Evan's columns was simply a *wonderful* idea.

**May 4, 1964**

*Hello from Haze!*

Note to readers: I was up in Fargo Saturday for the funeral of a woman who was one of my first interviews when I wrote for the *Forum*. After our meeting, she revealed she had sudden concerns about her privacy and asked me not to write the story. I agreed, but now, after having learned of her recent death, I dug out my notes on our interview and decided to write what I hope is a tribute.

"My real name's Susan Elias," the costume designer told me in the slightly British accent the movie stars she worked with used back in the 1930s. "A perfectly fine moniker, but two weeks in Hollywood and I became SuZell."

Dyed an unnatural black, her hair was worn in a low chignon, like a ballet dancer's. Her face was pale, except for two feverish-looking spots of rouge. She held a cigarette in a foot-long ebony holder, given her, she informed me, by the Earl of Sussex.

"I was once given a ham on rye by the Earl of Sandwich," I said.

SuZell was not amused, her look implying that I had given her a sudden migraine. Stubbing out her cigarette in an onyx ashtray, she said, "Let's move on to my studio, shall we?"

The large room was filled with mannequins dressed in her designs.

"That was Roz's—*Rosalind Russell's*—favorite hostess gown. She told me she loved it so much she wore it to rags."

I replied that it looked brand-new.

Again the sudden, stabbing migraine look.

“She didn’t wear *that* one. These are my original designs, *dear*, prototypes, as it were, from which I was commissioned others.”

The clothing was beautiful; there was a business suit with linebacker shoulder pads she’d designed for Joan Crawford, a hoop-skirted ball gown for a Civil War movie, a pink blush of a dress whose silk seemed liquid. I could have spent hours examining the craftsmanship of the sewing, studying the way she set in a sleeve or draped a skirt on the bias, but touching anything was verboten and listening to SuZell rattle off the many testimonials she received to her genius . . . well, it got a little tiring.

“It’s obvious you loved your work in Hollywood,” I said, when we were back in her parlor. “What made you move back to Fargo?”

The migraine expression flashed on her face, and instead of answering my question, she said, “You sewed that blouse you’re wearing, didn’t you?”

Nodding, I flushed, wondering what misplaced dart or crooked seam had tattled on me.

“It’s very well-constructed,” she said, screwing a new cigarette into the end of her holder. “We designers are like architects, don’t you think? Concerned with form and space and how it bests suits a person.”

“I didn’t design this,” I said, tugging at my collar. “I used a pattern.”

After lighting up, SuZell drew in what might be the longest inhale in the history of smokers, and her exhale put me in the middle of a fog bank.

“It might behoove you to learn how to accept a compliment,” she said. “Especially from someone your superior.”

It was then I thought my afternoon with the famous designer should end, and after I put my pen and notebook

in my purse, the woman's rouged and powdered face did what it hadn't done before: became animated by laughter.

For a moment I wondered if I were dealing with someone who'd dropped a few marbles in the game of old age, and seeing my confusion, she laughed even harder.

"Have you had lunch?" she said finally, and when I shook my head, she added, "Fabulous. You can experience some more of my talents."

She served me a bowlful from a stove pot on slow simmer, and after my first spoonful of the orange soup, I said, "Oh, my."

"If I make something, I make it well," she said.

"What is it? It's so *good*."

"Sweet potato bisque. The sweet potatoes are from my friend Carl's farm. So is the cream."

I nodded, wanting to use my mouth to eat rather than talk.

"When I consider the damage canned soups have done to the American palate." SuZell shook her head. "Well, it's just like everything else. Convenience has overthrown quality as king."

The thick-crust bread was homemade, and she used something called "a French press" to make our coffee. Dessert was light-as-air meringue cookies.

"I always kept a tin of these in my fitting room," she said. "Fairly low calorie, fairly big flavor. The stars loved them."

We talked through the afternoon, SuZell answering my questions thoughtfully.

Everything started, she said, when she flipped a coin in the chicken coop after she and her brother had finished collecting eggs.

"Heads was for New York. Tails was Hollywood. Tails won, and I packed a suitcase that night.

"You know that old song, 'How ya gonna keep 'em down on the farm'? My dad sang that at the supper table when I

told them I was leaving.” SuZell’s face softened. “Dad and Mama were my biggest fans.”

She talked about how the Hays Code put an end to the sensual gowns and dresses designers were making. “After that, the undergarments were like trusses.” She talked about how confidence levels rarely went hand in hand with beautiful faces and figures. “In the end, it’s all about feeling loved, isn’t it? First and foremost by yourself.”

When I asked again why she had returned to Fargo after all those decades in Hollywood, she shrugged. “It just tired me out. When they decided I was too old to work, what did that place hold for me? The family farm—now my nephew runs it—is only a couple miles west of town, so I see my brother and his family a lot—and I still have high school friends here. And of course, Helmer.”

“Who’s Helmer?”

The sudden migraine look flashed on her face, but it was quickly softened with a smile.

“Only the man who makes Clark Gable and Cary Grant *and* Gary Cooper look like two-bit stand-ins. The man the girl stupidly left behind, but the one the woman wisely came home to.”

When I left, she gave me the kind of pin cushion you wear around your wrist like a bracelet.

“You always want to work smart,” SuZell said. “Never take the shortcuts that will shortchange you, but if there’s a shortcut that will get you there easier, take it.”

## **May 6, 1964**

TO THE EDITOR:

Having grown up in Fargo, I really enjoyed the piece on my old friend Susan Elias. We were chums from the time we first met in school, and I can’t tell you how many fashion tips she dispensed throughout the years! “Why go for ordinary,” she told me, when we were in the coat section at Orlandson’s and I tried on a practical plaid mackinaw,

“when you can go for extraordinary?” SuZell’s success made all of us proud.

Mrs. Mildred Baccus

P.S. I wound up buying the plaid wool mackinaw anyway.

Among other reader responses was the one from the Ramblin’s by Walt columnist, whose crabbed penmanship simply declared, “Still puking!” but Susan (who, Caroline teased, would be “SuMac like the shrub,” if she combined her first and last names) chose not to publish it, nor did she print his response to Haze’s following column—“This one drove me to the crapper!”

### **May 11, 1964**

#### *Evans’s Epistle\**

In the small town in western North Dakota where I grew up, we had Crazy Days, a weekend set aside for all Main Street merchants to offer deep discounts, free samples, and giveaways. Anyone visiting Grudem’s Shoes got a shoehorn, the five-and-dime gave children balloons, and Mr. Nelson of Nelson’s Hardware handed out yardsticks. That was on Saturday; Sundays the stores were closed and instead replaced by kiosks selling ice cream and cotton candy, and there was a parade, whose participants were encouraged to dress, well, crazy. Playing in the bandshell were Cy Shelby and The Swingers, a quintet composed mostly of farmers, whose rehearsal studio was Cy’s cow barn. (It was local legend that Cy’s serenaded Guernseys produced extrasweet milk.)

As exciting as Crazy Days were, they could hardly prepare me for the launch of Granite Creek’s first Nordic Fest.

Dreamed up by the civic-minded visionaries of the Women’s Auxiliary and our local Sons of Norway chapter, the festival kicked off with a breakfast Saturday morning in the basement of St. Peder’s Lutheran Church with lefse and

the thick, rich Norwegian porridge that is rommegrot. The coffee was so strong that three days after the festival, I'm still up.

The Nordic Fest parade (more toned-down than that of Crazy Days) featured a contingent of women in their "bunads," the traditional Norwegian costumes representative of the area from which the wearer's ancestors came. Playing the fiddle, Ole Siggurson, served as a pied piper of sorts, leading the women, whose long skirts, jackets, vests and/or aprons featured beautifully intricate embroidery.

There was a bit of a lull after the parade, with no more events scheduled until the Swedish meatball supper that evening, hosted by Our Savior's, another of Granite Creek's Lutheran churches. Danish pastries were offered for dessert, which inspired one congregant to say, "Thank goodness, Denmark gets a little recognition in all this hullabaloo!"

Once the plates were cleared, we were encouraged to go into the sanctuary to hear Ardis Amdahl on the piano, accompanying her sister Gladys in a concert of Swedish folk music.

"Next year we hope to have more events for the children," said Avis Blake, president of the Ladies Auxiliary. "Maybe some clowns." At that point she turned to Dolf Romsaas, president of the Sons of Norway.

"Do they even have clowns in Scandinavia?"

\*I'm having trouble coming up with a name for my column!  
All suggestions sent in will be considered!