

To Hell In A Sidecar

by Mary-Alice Culp

Mly stepmother Opal was convinced that if you wore your hair in bangs and used lipstick, you were destined to become a prostitute down on 97th Street.

"Just keep it up!" she yelled, when she caught me with Tangee on my lips and my bangs unpinned. "If you're not careful, you're going to wind up down there around the police station where all the chippies are. My God! The next little item you'll want will be one of those ankle bracelet things."

Opal's bushy eyebrows shot up meaningfully and her cheeks began to shake. "I swear to God himself you're going to hell in a sidecar,"

When I asked what a chippie was, a dark flush spread across her pale face and she hollered "Nobody likes a fresh kid, Barbie!"

The 1949 Buicks had chrome rings on the vents that ran along the sides of their hoods. The grade nine boys pried them off and gave them to the grade nine girls to wear as bracelets. There were two girls in our class that did not stand a chance of getting one of those bracelets (unless of course they swiped them themselves). I was one of the untouchables and the other was Beatrice Pomeroy, who weighed in at 180 pounds and told everybody in a loud voice that she figured that grade nine boys were a vastly over-rated species. Beatrice wanted to hang around me but gave me the crazies in study hall crunching candies into my left ear. We were also the only grade nine girls at our school who hadn't been invited to sit in the last row of the Roxy on Saturday afternoons and neck. It was also a known fact that no grade nine boy would have been caught dead riding either Beatrice or me around town on the crossbar of his bike.

My lack of popularity galvanized me into going on a self-improvement kick. I sneaked Opal's bottle of OdorOno, and squandered my baby-sitting money on a cheap bottle of perfume called Russian Passion from the Kresge store and put dabs of vanilla behind my ears whenever I could get at it without being impaled by Opal's black and piercing glare. Every night I polished my saddle shoes until they looked almost like new and pressed the pleats of my tartan skirt until the

kitchen took on the aroma of damp wool. I studied my "Health and Personal Development" manual searching for clues and read every issue of *Catting All Girls* in my quest for the ways of winning social acceptance.

But I still wasn't popular. In fact, Larry O'Donnell tripped me in the hall and told me to give it a rest because *I* looked like a hockey stick with hair. I went back to Kresge's after school and bought my first bra,—size 30AA—and I hiked the straps up as high as they would go and stuffed the cups with toilet paper. The next day at school Larry whistled at me and called out, "Hey Cookie!" When I looked in his direction, he screamed "Not you, dog biscuit." Later that day he sort of sidled by my desk and suddenly his hand snaked out and he tipped my bottle of Southsea Blue ink. I had to stay after school to scrub the stain with powdered cleanser. The next morning Larry was holding court, telling everybody he had seen me pee on the floor and that was why the spot was clean.

Mr. Duke the principal of our school was afraid of Larry. Duke was very fat with a huge bald head. He let his hair grow long on one side of his head then smeared it over his baldness with Brylcreem. He owned a messy looking mustache and small flakes of dried snot snowed all over the desk. One day when Duke was standing outside on the cindered playground smoking a Black Cat cigarette, Larry threw the basketball at a picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, then stuffed the rather broken mess into the wastepaper basket and covered his crime with all the looseleaf pages he could rip out of our collective binders. Old Duke accidentally kicked the wastepaper basket off his platform and Jimmy Gannon blamed by Larry took ten on each rather than have the daylight's punched out of him after school.

The reason I wasn't popular I figured, had a lot to do with Opal and her darn punishments. She had just ruined the whole summer of 1948 for me and that was the time kids going into grade nine had sort of started going around together. On Wednesdays the boys took Manual Training and the girls travelled downtown on the bus to take Home Economics in the basement of St. Mary's High School. The old nun in charge of the Home

Ec class should have been retired. Her small wrinkled face was surrounded by an accordion-pleated wimple that dug cruelly into her forehead. She habitually ran a gnarled index finger underneath the elastic, exposing an angry red gouge. Julia Sopchuk said she was just like Tarsisius suffering for the sins of the world. Julia also told us that nuns shaved their heads because their habits were so hot arid heavy and that as brides of Christ offered this up as a sacrifice to God. Julia wanted to be a nun she said and that was why she was so knowledgeable. So I told her she had better stop going saskatoon picking in the bushes with boys. Julia shot me a withering look out of her pale blue eyes and told me that I had a very evil mind and for that she wasn't going to play hookey with me anymore.

We had started playing hookey in the spring. Mother Mary Ignatius or "Iggy" as she was called by the Home Ec girls, was getting on our nerves with her shaking and the frantic blessing of herself each time one of the "cooking students" brought her a fruit nappy of Blancmange or Lemon Snow to taste. She also had a penchant for old vegetable water which she kept in an aluminium pitcher in the icebox and made us drink that rather than allowing us a trip to the drinking fountain.

"Never, never feed the sink" she would whine. One day she was reaming out two girls from St. Claire's for throwing the scummy water away, and her upper plate came shooting out and broke on the cement floor. That was the same day she had caught several of us smoking in the girls' washroom. We were passing around two dried out Buckingham's that Julia had filched from her dad when suddenly there she was staring at us through the blue smoke.

"Girls that smoke," she said in her whiney little voice, "are girls that will drink."

She fixed each of us with a long look out of her rheumy little eyes, "and girls that drink," she said, drawing in her breath and holding it before she lowered her eyes, "are girls that will do *other* things," she exhaled.

My hand quickly shot up and in response to my frantic waving and finger snapping, "Iggy" hooked me with a tired eye before she said in an impatient voice,

"Yes Barbara, what is it?"

"What *other* things do you mean," I asked eagerly, ignoring the wave of tittering that rose and was held by the other smokers, because I really did want to know.

The afternoon sunlight played on her glasses creating twin glittering retinas as "Iggy" turned and swept out of the room, the clunking sounds of her heavy wooden rosary along with her parting comment, "I do not appreciate the sauciness in young women Barbara, please see me after class," were left hanging in the smoke-filled air.

"This home economics course must have been written at the turn of the century," Dad said one day while he was idly flicking through my manual, chortling at the illustrations. I told him that I suspected "Iggy" had written it herself. Dad just chuckled mildly, heh heh heh and went out to trim the hedge. Dad worked shifts a lot and since he had married that darn Opal he hadn't been making much of an attempt to communicate with me. He and Opal were together all the time and went to see George Raft movies or visited her relatives a lot, Opal was getting to be the go-between, and I resented her "nobody gets *to* the father except through me" approach. My position in the family had definitely been usurped by her. I was beginning to wonder when I would receive a notice that to see him I would have to make an appointment through her.

By May of 1948 I had already completed all the silly chapters in the archaic Canadian Home Economics Manual. I had done the chapters on home nursing, food preparation, waitressing and laundry. After each completion, one had to summonse old Mother Mary Ignatius from her little desk under the clock and the statue of the Infant of Prague. She usually gave you a star and went back to saying her rosary. Julia and I sailed through polishing silver and setting the tables. We cleaned out the Home Ec cupboards and organized drawers. These chores were extra because we had been caught smoking. Ragged looking antimacassars were washed and starched and doilies in various stages of decomposition enhanced the warped trays that we placed before Mother Mary Ignatius so she could sample our cottage pudding in style. Finally we were ready for the sewing project which consisted of making a full-length broadcloth dressmaker slip. Julia's mother sewed hers, but I knew there wasn't much sense in asking Opal to sew mine—she would think it was a sin—Opal thought most things were sinful, even pooping in the bushes. So I carried the fabric back and forth from school to Home Economics class and then home again until it became exactly as the Rinso commercial sang—"tattle-tale gray." It had holes in it where stitches from crooked seams had been picked out so many

times. One day, I decided that even if I ever managed to sew the darn thing together, I sure would not ever wear it, so after a conference with Julia, we decided to set the clock ahead. Mother Mary Ignatius shook her pocket watch, reset it, wound it and shoved it back into the mysterious folds of her heavy black habit. Then she dismissed us with her benediction and a very puzzled look,

I knew I couldn't go home. Opal had this built-in lie detector for a brain that raised an alarm everytime I tried to get away with something. For instance, she just happened to be walking her dog that afternoon before Christmas and discovered my school books ditched in a snowbank behind the Army and Navy sign where I had hidden them when Julia and I decided to sneak into the matinee at the Empress Theatre. She gave me twenty minutes of fire and brimstone, two smacks across the face with her big bowling arm with its famous follow-through motion and grounded me for two months with no Lux Radio Theatre or Boston Blackie shows.

Not willing to take any chances of getting caught at something again, Julia and I found a rather neat way to pass a few golden hours at the Hudson's Bay store's record department. We found that you could ask for any record and sit in a little sound booth while it was played for you. So we began to spend every Wednesday afternoon sneaking out of home ec class after the roll had been called and racing down the street to the Bay. After a few sessions in the sound booths, we knew the words to all the songs on the hit parade.

My happy little world came to an end the last week of June. A letter had been sent to Opal regarding my hookey playing about the same time that Darlene Gerlach's mother blabbed to Opal on the bus that she had seen me quite often in downtown Edmonton playing in the sound booths at the Bay. Mrs. Gerlach played the piano on the other side of the escalator from where the records were sold. She played sheet music on request every afternoon and all day Saturday. She played "Dance Ballerina Dance" and "The Blue Skirt Waltz". Darlene Gerlach was really enjoying life now that her mother was away from home part of the time. It gave her freedoms she had never known before. Mrs. Gerlach was a big bony woman who wore broken down white oxfords and rolled her nylons down around her ankles until they resembled two skinny donuts. She never used to allow Darlene out of the yard because she was afraid she would catch the infantile paralysis. Darlene couldn't have a bike because she would



Elise Johnson

certainly be hit by a car and crippled for life and she couldn't go skating with us because as Mrs. Gerlach told Opal; "she might fall and people being the pigs they were, would probably skate right over her." Before Mrs. Gerlach got her piano-playing job, she used to walk over to the school everyday at recess to watch Darlene through the frost fence to make sure she was still all in one piece. But despite the restrictions she placed on Darlene's activities, Darlene was still the first one in the junior highschool to have a boyfriend. He was the grocery delivery boy who used to ride her around on the cross-bar of his bike and give her Burnt Almond and Fat Emma chocolate bars that he swiped from Yedlinski's Table Supply. So ironically, while Darlene was

sneaking out of the yard to ride around with Gordon Rackham on his wartime CCM, Darlene's mother was busy spying on me in the Bay on Wednesday afternoons.

After Opal had put the two reports together she grabbed me.

"So?" she hollered, pushing me down on the chesterfield.

"So?" she demanded, glaring at me with her sharp black eyes,

"So?" she said leaning against the wall with her arms folded in front of her chest.

"So?" She spoke out dramatically, raising her thick eyebrows meaningfully.

So, I stared right back at her and said: "So what?"

"What?" She screamed. Then suddenly there I was engulfed in a torrent of "who did you think you were fooling?" "Are you ever a prize idiot to think you could get away with this! Now your day of reckoning has arrived young lady!" It wound up with Opal's ominous "Nobody likes a fresh kid, Barbie."

She slapped me hard—right across the face. My nose began to bleed like a frozen waterspout in spring. Then she demanded to see the "famous" broadcloth slip that had never gotten sewn together. After inspecting the dismal looking rag, she decided that I was going to spend the months of July and August sewing that damned slip or she was going to talk those nuns into keeping me back in grade eight for another year.

To make things appear even worse, Julia Sopchuk rolled her pale blue pig eyes and announced in her adenoidal voice that her mother said the road to hell was paved with fresh girls like me.

"And so," she quipped sanctimoniously, "I'm not allowed to hang around with you anymore."

I would have given a chrome bracelet just to find out what Julia had told her mother about me.

The whole long and hot prairie summer was spent cooped up in Opal and Dad's chintzy little bedroom sewing away on the treadle machine. each time I looked out the window, I would see my friends riding by on their bikes on their way to the pool. They would look in my direction and

wave their towels. I would sit and imagine them tanning on the bleachers and learning back dives. Then I would cry big tears of self-pity over tailor tacks, darts and french seams. Just when I would think that my tears were dried up, another group would stroll by with their tennis racquets to play behind the Number Eight Fire Hall.

In the middle of all this misery, I got my period and Opal told me the whole story in two minutes flat, turning beet red in the process. She told me it was going to happen whether I liked it or not so learn to live with it and stop being a big baby. What Opal didn't know was that I already knew all about periods and was crying because I was her prisoner. Dad wanted to know why I was so upset and Opal nodded smugly and told him it was because I had suddenly turned into a young lady. Then they exchanged a conspiratorial look. Feelings of shock and betrayal washed over me—shock that my Dad might know about things as personal as periods and betrayed because he asked Opal and not *me* questions about *me*,

Sitting alone in my room, I began venting my frustrations by listing all the dirty words I knew. Beginning with asshole, I started working my way through the alphabet of filth. Shithead I wrote. Then stumped because I couldn't think of a single dirty word that began with the letter "T", I wrote Opal is a shithead.

Suddenly the earth spun. I felt like something was trying to separate my head from my shoulders. Opal had snuck up behind me on her goobie looking crepe-soled shoes and let fly with her famous bowling arm follow-through swing. She struck a rather theatrical pose with her arms raised heavenward.

"Barbara," she spat. "I really don't know what to do with you. Your Dad and I could be so happy together if it weren't for you mooching around this place always getting into trouble. I'm afraid I have to really punish you this time" she said, dropping her arms to her sides with an air of resignation and phoney regret.

Suddenly her little black eyes lit up and I knew she was secretly enjoying what she was about to say next.

"Tomorrow I'm going downtown to the Silk O Una shop and getting more broadcloth. Instead of making two slips you are now going to sew four." And then she smirked in a weird little way and said; "Your Dad and I are going to drive down to Jasper for the week-end but I'm afraid your impossible behaviour has excluded you from going along. You can stay home and get those slips finished and don't get any cute notions of having your friends over while we're out of town because I've already arranged for Mrs. Gerlach to watch the house like a hawk."

"Bitch" I thought to myself. "B" stands for "Bitch". Opal is a shithead bitch, I mouthed to her back as she bounced out of the room on the balls of her big feet.

The week-end passed in a rosy haze made possible by liberal libations of Dad's home-made potato champagne. I covered my theft by adding seven cups of water to the crock. I never went near that old sewing machine once.

I was pleased when school went in in September until I discovered everyone had cliqued-up and I was an outsider for the first time in my school career. I was thirteen and my whole life was ruined. Larry O'Donnell never missed an opportunity to say something mean and had taken to placing nasty notes inside my new imitation alligator hide zipper case. The notes said cruel things like "Barbara Lee Balmer-Watt has two backs" and "does anybody know the difference between a shingle and Barbie's chest?" One day his note said "there's more kleenex in the right one than the left one."

"Why does Larry O'Donnell hate me so much?" I asked Dad one night when Opal was out bowling.

"Well, it's this way Barbie," he said exploding a kitchen match with his thumbnail. The light from the wooden match lit up the corner of his face as he bent to light his cigarette and I could see he was trying not to laugh. "If he didn't really like you he would ignore you" he said and his familiar heh heh heh trailed after me as I left the room to ponder this new knowledge and allow *it* to shape itself and grow certain in my mind.

Things started to change for the better after Christmas when Larry stopped slamming me into the boards at the skating rink and quit flinging my toque onto the skating shack roof. He started skating by and grabbing my arm—never saying a word everytime Mr. Mulholland would play "I'm Going to Get You on a Slow Boat to China."

I was even getting included in the conversations in the girls' side of the shack where we sat around on skate-pocked benches loosening and tightening our skate laces and drying our mitts near the potbellied stove. It was in that very place the winter before that *I* had learned all about periods and that MaryLou Bickersley's brother was in jail and that there was an easy way to sneak into the Empress Theatre.

One magical Friday night when the moon hung upside down like a thin silver lantern, Larry was waiting for me outside the girls' door. He took my skates and slung them over his shoulder in a most cavalier manner and walked me home. We walked down the tree-lined back alley drinking in the mellow winter air and marvelling at the hoar frost. Luckily I didn't realize we walked there so Larry wouldn't run into any of his friends and get teased.

About a week before the grade nine graduation, Larry was riding me around on the cross-bar of his bike in the soft June twilight. I was carrying a bouquet of lilacs that he had just pinched from Mrs. Gerlach's backyard when suddenly he stopped alongside a 1949 Buick that still had its chrome bracelets intact. Quick as lightning, Larry twisted one out and slid it over my hand. I was having more fun than I had enjoyed in at least a year.

The following Saturday afternoon, we sat in the last row at the Roxy Theatre and I thought we were going to neck and that I was finally going to find out what it was like being kissed by a boy. But instead, we split a package of Sen Sen, shared a package of Juicy Fruit gum and ate our way through a sack of jawbreakers. Then Larry held my hand and I thought to myself as I stared up at the phoney stars that twinkled on the ceiling of the Roxy that going to hell in a sidecar was going to be alright!