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JEANNE BARNEY
DAUGHTER OF “THE ELEPHANT GIRL”
THE STRAIGHT WOMAN
AMONG THE LEATHERMEN
QUEER THEORY AND CONSPIRACY THEORY
THE BED OF PROCRUSTES

In the five-person peelage of Larry Townsend and his quartet, Jeanne Barney was the only woman, the only straight person, and the only parent. She had a daughter about whom she never spoke. She also happened to have royal Hollywood roots in grandparents who had been successful silent film actors. I’m reporting the genealogy that Jeanne Mastin-Washburn-Chesley-Barney, she of the multiple surnames who had more aliases than Larry, told me. Her Chicago-born grandfather, matinee idol Bryant Washburn, appeared in 350 films between 1911-1947. His first wife, her grandmother, actress Mabel Forrest, appeared in several leading roles in the 1920s before they divorced in 1928 after fourteen years and two sons. Jeanne’s Chicago-born father was Joseph Grabiner Mastin (1921-2005), an artist and draftsman who had a side hustle as a bookie. For fifty-nine consecutive years her mother, the painter Irene Spencer (1916-2006), was serially married to, divorced from, and lived with Joe Mastin who died on Christmas Day 2005, three weeks before Irene herself died on January 17.

Jeanne Mastin was born in the summer of 1938 in Chicago where her mother, who had begun studying at the Art Institute at age nine, survived the Depression by traveling two years with the circus as the Elephant Girl (who rode the elephant), drawing maps for Rand McNally during World War II, and then becoming a newspaper cartoonist before beginning her fine art career in 1964 writing and illustrating children’s books while Jeanne was

becoming a columnist in the gay press. In 1980, *Plate World: The Magazine of Collectors Plates* described Spencer, beloved for her mother-and-child portraits on china, as “one of the most prolific and popular of women plate artists since Sister Berta Hummel.”

Jeanne called her mother, who chronicled Jeanne’s early life artistically in her treasured baby book, her best friend. She did years of eldercare for her father and her mother who both died six months before Larry’s Fred died in July 2006. Bonded even more while grieving the deaths of her parents and his spouse, Jeanne and Larry struggled together through the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays and the incoming New Year of 2007.

On the tenth day of that bitter-cold January of 2007 in Los Angeles, Mark Hemry shot an outdoor photograph of Jeanne, Larry, and me that I treasure for its personal intimacy. He posed us grouped together on a stone bench, all three of us joking and laughing, on the steps of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, the former home of the Academy Awards, at the LA Music Center where Larry had driven us. While we camped and tangled ourselves into each other’s arms, he framed together for the first and only time the founding LA editor of *Drummer*, the founding San Francisco editor of *Drummer*, and the famous novelist who was a *Drummer* columnist.

Despite her public life in gay publishing, Jeanne, divorced from the journalist Frank Chesley, was an intensely private and furtive person, a quadruple Virgo with a stubborn moon in Taurus, a dress-size zero, a fan of Roscoe’s House of Chicken and Waffles, an unrepentant smoker with crushes on Frank Sinatra and Daniel Craig, a “Friend of Bill W” at Alcoholics Anonymous since 1984, a passionate animal-rights activist who rescued dogs like her Chinese Crested named Suessie after Dr. Seuss, and a satirist who dubbed her home “Wit’s End.”

When asked how often she had been married, she always said, “More than twice.” When asked how many cats she had, she said, “More than two.” When asked about her birthday, she warned, “Never fuck around with a quadruple Virgo.” When asked how to deal with an alcoholic friend, she answered from her own experience with Larry in *Grunt* magazine: “If you can’t stand this guy

when he's drunk, and you can't stand him when he's sober, maybe he'll be easier to tolerate if you're drunk."

As a 1950s high-school teen-queen, she sported Spaulding white bucks with eraser-pink soles and circular skirts with lots of crinoline petticoats. After graduating from the University of Chicago, she sharpened her tongue as a copywriter in Chicago, then San Francisco where she wrote for radio station KSAY, and then LA where she reported for the *Sierra Madre News*. Working as a public relations writer, she figured "advertising could be a force for good in society." So, while watching the rise of gay culture in Los Angeles, she had a pioneering vision of a career opportunity for a straight woman in gay media. The queening of Jeanne Barney was about to begin. In pre-Stonewall 1967, she pitched writing an advice column to Bill Rau and Dick Mitch, the founders of the original *Advocate*. They hired her as one of their founding staff and a continuing contributor until she quit to become the founding LA editor of *Drummer* when Embry hired her in 1975 and got her arrested in 1976.

She was a muse to her friend, the leather artist Chuck Arnett, who, famous for his 1962 leather mural in the Tool Box bar in San Francisco, painted an astounding full-length portrait of the tiny 98-pound Barney encased in her stylish leather boots with legs up to here and gorgeous long hair down to there tucked up under her leather cap. One of her lovers was the pro-baseball player Mickey McDermott, a drinking buddy of Jack Kerouac. She loved Dorothy Parker and Somerset Maugham whose transcendental novel, *The Razor's Edge*, was the book, she wrote me, "that most changed my life."

Having been injured in the 1994 Northridge Earthquake, she profiled herself as an alcoholic in a June 4, 1995, letter to the *LA Times* offering to donate her quad cane to a man the *Times* had featured in a sob story. She wrote:

In the pass-it-on spirit of Alcoholics Anonymous, of which I have been a clean and sober member for 10 ½ years, I have a quad cane (the kind that stands on its own four feet) which I will happily pass on to Chris Sylbert. I used it for only a short while last year, following

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a six-month hospitalization for injuries suffered in the January earthquake—and I would be delighted to see it go to a good home.

She explained to me that she had been standing on a three-foot-tall stool, photographing her damaged chimney for insurance purposes when an aftershock struck. “I went down—splat—on the driveway.”

Surviving Larry’s death, his “leather wife” becoming his “leather widow,” noted about her own health and vigor in 2008:

I’m still running with scissors and accepting candy from strangers. Just don’t call me “Gee-Anne.” And when I pass, I want my obituary to shout out, “She succumbed after winning a long struggle with life.”

Could Joan Didion have made a picnic of this eccentric salon whose authenticity was more colorful than fiction? I’ve always appreciated the brief “Introduction” Didion wrote to *Some Women*, a 1989 book of photographs by my former bi-coastal lover, Robert Mapplethorpe. Robert loved shooting leatherfolk in San Francisco, but he had no interest in shooting these LA players. If he had shot Larry and Jeanne for *Some Leatherfolk*, well, what an introduction Didion might have penned about her urban peers.

Jeanne was the most sophisticated, and was a woman famous for editing *Drummer* and for hosting leather functions and fundraisers. In 2006, Mark and I sent her a copy of *Play It as It Lays* because of all of the five, she was the most likely to appreciate a novel—with four narrators, written by an LA woman about a woman in LA—that mirrored their own panic, alienation, micro-aggressions, and sexual psychology. She was respected. The Reverend Troy Perry, founder of the Metropolitan Community Church, said in 2007:

There were many heterosexuals who helped us in the beginning, but Jeanne Barney was the first to help in Los Angeles. I tell everybody that. I’m so grateful.

She was also, despite some conservative-male reactions, the first and only woman to frequent the leather bathhouse Manspace, 5524 Santa Monica Boulevard, and was the only woman allowed to attend the invitation-only Full Moon Nights at the coincidentally named Larry's Bar, 5414 Melrose Avenue, which she pictured in *Drummer*, issue 4. When the Hawks Motorcycle Club honored her as "Humanitarian of the Year" at its Leather Sabbath in 1976, Rob Clayton photographed her, stylish in a mini-dress, for *Drummer* 11, page 25.

After college in 1961, she said that she, like Larry, got a government security clearance so she could write freelance for the conservative military newspaper, *Stars and Stripes*. When that didn't suit her, she turned to working with resistance groups like the Black-civil-rights and anti-war Peace and Freedom Party. She burned draft cards and bras in the street where crowds of young men ogled the free show. In an effort to syndicate herself during the Vietnam War in 1971, she began writing for the *Grunt Free Press*, the rag-paper alternative magazine full of military jokes, crude cartoons, and bare breasts for Vietnam veterans. Published in Agana, Guam, *Grunt* had an international circulation. Jeanne wanted to title her advice column in *Grunt* with the same title she was currently using in *The Advocate*, "Smoke from Jeannie's Lamp," but *The Advocate* said *no*; so she dubbed it "Genie Speaks" and used her real name as her byline. After exiting *Drummer* in 1976, she once again re-titled her column in 1977 as "Jeannie's Lamp" for the gay paper, *The Montrose Star*, in Houston, Texas.

She wanted *Drummer* to be *The Evergreen Review*. However, that was a content-and-style bridge too far for her LA walkers conceived or born in the 1920s and 1930s who were businessmen focused on "big box-office" profits rather than art and literature for their 1970s magazines, books, and films. She wrote me about John Embry's concept for *Drummer*.

He wanted a cash-cow stroke book; I wanted a literary stroke book because I thought people into leather were not without an intellectual dimension.

Always playing the part she needed in order to make a living in this boys' club, she, who was identified as "a housewife from La Crescenta" by the *Philadelphia Gay News*, marketed her buddies through the synergy of Embry's *Drummer*. She published Larry's fiction, and featured *Drummer* columnist Fred Halsted's second film *Sextool* on the cover of the second issue, and Earl and Legrand's leather cherry-popper fisting film, *Born to Raise Hell*, on the cover of the third; and Chuck Arnett's drawing of a leatherman on the fifth. She edited *Drummer* from June 1975 to December 1976, before it was rebranded in San Francisco, but she was Larry's "leather wife" who told me that, always defending Larry, she called herself "Larry's Bulldog."

Jeanne was one of three women involved in the *Drummer* origin story. Dagmar King was the first art director, and soon disappeared. My friend and co-worker, the jolly chain-smoking Marge Anderson (d. 1985) was the first typesetter who worked at *Drummer* for six years (1975-1981). Jeanne came aboard with them importing her humorous advice column from *The Advocate*, but she was not listed as editor-in-chief until issue three. She was editor for eighteen months and eleven issues in Los Angeles, and not for its whole LA run of seventeen issues, the last six of which Embry edited as his alter-ego, Robert Payne. After 1976, she left no imprint or fingerprints because Embry erased her by blacklisting her for her disloyalty in quitting because she wanted paid. She had no lingering influence in any way on the San Francisco version. In fact, she herself, embittered, wanted nothing to do with it.

Nevertheless, gay pop culture, skimming history seeking female avatars-behind-men, tends to mistake Jeanne for Jeanne d'Arc as if she personally had gestated a quarter-century of evolving style, content, and agenda of all 214 issues—which she did not—of what became the distinctly San Francisco *Drummer* which evolved—as quickly as the new 1970s scene itself evolved—after she exited mid-decade. When my longtime Chicago friends Andy Charles and Anthony DeBlase bought *Drummer* from Embry in 1986, publisher DeBlase, who wore tall riding boots and flared jodhpurs like Erich von Stroheim in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), wrote in issue 99 that when *Drummer* moved to San Francisco in 1977, the new editor changed its main theme

from leather to masculinity. No offense to queer studies, but to correct the zeal of revisionists imagining the fake news of a virgin birth and female continuity at an aggressively male-identity magazine does not diminish Jeanne's very real contributions in the origin story in which facts, context, and human relationships cannot be discarded.

Drummer itself provides a fixed historic timeline of twenty-four years of 214 monthly issues which list an objective nonesuch of authentic dates, names, and topics. There is a myth that Larry founded *Drummer*. He didn't. There is this myth that Jeanne influenced the 207 issues after she quit. Interesting if she had, but she didn't. I know. I was there in the chair in the office in a new city with a new national demographic. While she was also a pioneer contributor during the founding of *The Advocate*, no one claims her contributions influenced every *Advocate* issue thereafter. Just as *Drummer* contents pages show Larry didn't write for the magazine until 1980, Jeanne contributed nothing in text or subtext after April 1976, although issues she touched ran through December. There is no internal evidence in the pages of *Drummer* to support claims to the contrary. While Jeanne loved a good fight, female empowerment legends, no matter how sincere, are not gay history.

As a hired participant in the resettlement of the immigrant-refugee *Drummer* in San Francisco, I first learned of this Barney-Embry feud from Embry, with more privy details from Larry, and then years later from Jeanne whom I succeeded as Embry's editor-in-chief in San Francisco from March 1977 to January 1980. During those three years, she, whom I had not yet met or talked to, stayed silent in LA while Embry attacked her inside my *Drummer* issues. He kept her estranged from all of us. In fact, while I continued contributing writing and photography to *Drummer* for twenty more years after my editorship, Jeanne and I, tangled in the net of Embry's casting, didn't meet until January 1, 2006, when, fulfilling my New Year's resolution, I thought one of us should finally break the ice. I picked up my phone in Northern California and dialed the Los Angeles number (that Larry had given me) to ask if I could interview her for a book I was writing on *Drummer*. She talked for four hours.

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Larry, who was the leatherman behind the vanilla woman, and was the constant referee between Embry and Barney, appreciated Jeanne's bold strokes in helping Embry design the physical format of the magazine's standard layout of features, fiction, reviews, and editorial columns. But where form needs content and content needs an authentic voice, she was not herself a leather player, thinker, or writer—like Larry whose cult of personality rivaled her cult of personality. She was her genuine self, but lacked that kind of participatory authenticity in a men's adventure magazine famous for the authenticity of its first-person narratives in the style of the New Journalism.

It must be remembered that Jeanne was working as a vanilla columnist for *The Advocate* when Embry first approached her in 1975. He had founded his small pulp-zine version of *Drummer* all by himself in November 1971, and collaborated on his second version as *H.E.L.P. Drummer* with Larry in 1972, three years before he hired Jeanne to come aboard as staff editor for the larger slick-paper version. *Drummer* was her job, not her mission. She was moonlighting. She did not have a leather eye which today would be a leather gaze. But then, in the 1990s, neither, by her own admission, did the non-leather film director Wickie Stamps, the female editor and “butch gent” who bravely, but unsuccessfully, tried to save *Drummer* from going out of business on her watch in 1999. Fifteen years after Barney, Stamps edited twenty-five issues (182-208) to Jeanne's eleven.

To Jeanne's true credit, she and Embry created a working blueprint for a leather magazine, based on Larry's *H.E.L.P. Newsletter*, that by the post-arrest issue eleven spun out of her orbit when she—abetted by advice from Larry who disliked *Drummer* at that time—cut ties with Embry who then warned subscribers away from doing Leather Fraternity mail-order business with her. His continuing revenge when he denounced her in my *Drummer* 30, June 1979, page 38, was one of the reasons I quit as editor six months later. Two issues after her Cycle Sluts feature, she washed her hands of the whole *Drummer* affair. And vice versa. Truth be told, she, who was an irritable smoker, drinker, and divorcee, quit long before *Drummer* left LA because of the irreconcilable

differences over the stroke-book nature of *Drummer*, and because Embry owed her thirteen thousand dollars in back pay.

Beginning with *Drummer* 19, the remaining 207 issues of *Drummer* published in San Francisco were, in actuality, re-imagined, and developed post-Jeanne by two publishers after Embry, and by dozens of male, female, and transitioning editors like Pat Califia (issues 173-176), and by thousands of contributors, including Larry, who added seriously focused kink and fetish and male gender identity to the thrust and contents of the rather fluffy original LA version of the leather magazine that Embry had begun as a local bar rag with ads for toupees and the Bla Bla Café in Studio City. On their own terms in the fast evolving pop-culture sex scene of the 1970s, the post-Barney contributors created the archetypal *Drummer* that fans now think of as classic *Drummer*. Jeanne? They built beyond her whose name most of them did not know, and whose work in *Drummer* they had not read.

And yet among leather originalists like Larry, she was, for all the dice she rolled, a part of our *Drummer* Salon forever. In leather history, for all the credit she fully deserves for her midwifery in the delivery of the infant *Drummer*, she, whom I adored, still has the gravitational pull of the moon because people fancy the idea of the Great Woman behind the Great Man whether true or not.

Jeanne wrote me September 2, 2006, about Larry, the man she called “Mr. Willful”: “He told me at dinner last evening that if I were a boy, he’d take me to bed.” Something they never did.

In that same January 2007, Mark Hemry shot several color photos of the little tribe—threatened with extinction—posed in its very own Natural History diorama at the French Quarter picturing Jeanne, Terry, Roger, and me seated around a blue-ingham-laid table with Larry holding down the center seat—his sad face drooped and depressed after his first Christmas and New Year’s as a widower. This photo, minus John Embry, is an historic shot of some of the people who made original *Drummer* happen. Larry had only nineteen months to live.