

A Philadelphia Story

by Daniel Harris

In the summer of 1963 I went to Philadelphia to study with a member of the Philadelphia Orchestra. I didn't have much money, so I needed a cheap place to live. I asked my prospective teacher where I might lodge. He gave me the telephone number of a student at the Curtis Institute of Music.

“He has a big apartment and he rents out rooms to fellow students. Maybe one of his renters will be gone for the summer and you can sublet a room.”

I called the number.

“Jon Nikkanen.” You could see the tight smile and his white teeth from the way he said his name.

“Hi, Jon, Mr. Gigliotti gave me your name. I am going to study with him for the month of June this summer. He said you might have a room for me.”

“Well, that depends if Gayle gets a gig with the Boston Pops for the summer. If he does, I have a room for \$100 a month.

“When will you know?”

“In a few weeks.”

“I really need a place to stay. Can you call me when you know?”

“Give me your number and I'll call you either way.”

It turned out that Gayle didn't get the gig, but Jon said he would rent me his living room couch for fifty dollars a month. I would also get half a shelf in his refrigerator. “It's a deal.”

I arrived in Philly on Memorial Day Weekend. Jon was not answering his buzzer. I asked the super when he might be back. He didn't know, but said there was a slew of people living in his apartment, so if I just hung around, someone would let me in. I had

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my clarinets, a backpack with my clothes and some clarinet music.

I waited four hours. Finally around ten at night, Gayle showed up.

"Are you Jon Nikkanen?"

"No, I'm Gayle Chavchavadze.

"Do you live in Jon Nikkanen's apartment?"

"Yes. Are you waiting for Jon?"

"Yes, he said I could rent his living room couch," I replied.

"I think it's taken, but only Jon would know and he's not due back until Monday night. He's painting Mr. Gigliotti's summer cottage in Atlantic City.

There was a long silence as Gayle fumbled for his keys.

"Do you think I could come in and wait for Jon?"

"Hey, no problem. Most of the people staying here are gone for the weekend."

It was a crib. It was a slum. It was a wreck. No one had taken the garbage out in weeks and the apartment stank.

Gayle went into a bedroom. A few minutes later, I heard him ripping through the bassoon solo in the last movement of the Beethoven Fourth Symphony. He nailed it with no warm-up. Impressive.

The spirit of the place was to practice, and even though I was tired from an eight-hour bus ride and no food, I took out my instrument and began practicing the solos and etudes I was going to play for Mr. Gigliotti on Tuesday.

"I really like your sound. What was your name? "

"Ben, Ben Clarone."

"Do your play double lip? No teeth on the mouthpiece?"

“Yes, I studied with an old time Italian teacher. My current teacher thinks it is the best, but not suitable for today's demands on performers.”

“Well, it is a sound to die for.”

“Thank you. I hope it is not a mistake to study with Mr. Gigliotti.

“Oh, no. He is a very open teacher. His own teacher played double lip in the Philadelphia Orchestra and his teacher's teachers played double lip. It's a tradition dating back to Mozart's time when clarinetists were oboe players who doubled on the new instrument, and we know oboe and bassoon players played double lip as they do today.

“I hope so, I'm spending a month and hard earned money to glean some wisdom from him.

“Don't fret, he is an amazing teacher with incredible knowledge of the clarinet. Do you want a beer,” he asked.

“I'd love one. But I haven't eaten since last night.”

“Welcome to the world of the aspiring musician.”

We shared a quart of Tiger Ale and some Provolone cheese dipped in hot spicy mustard.

“Do you play chess?”

“I play a so-so game,” I replied.

He laid out a chessboard. We played a game that progressed rapidly until the endgame. I won with a series of moves I copied from Brooklyn's own, Bobby Fischer.

“When do you think Jon will be back?”

“Probably Monday night. He has a day gig three days a week selling pantyhose door-to-door.”

“That's pretty weird. A guy selling pantyhose door-to-door.”

“Hey, he only works three days a week and makes a ton of money.”

“It must be an interesting gig. I can't imagine a guy selling pantyhose.”

“When you meet Jon, you will understand.”

I met Jon on Monday night about eleven. He came into the apartment with a double clarinet case and a gym bag.

“You must be Ben Clarone.”

“Yes, I am. Do you have a place for me? I have no place to stay.”

“Well, you're in luck. Frank is staying with his Japanese girlfriend on Martha's Vineyard. Everyone will move up and you'll get the living room couch.”

“Thank you.”

“The only problem is, we work on a seniority system. You're last arrival, so you're last in the bathroom and the kitchen.”

Life settled into a routine. I got up at seven. Had a Pop-tart and coffee for breakfast. Practiced all morning. Went to the German deli and had a Tiger Ale and a hoagie for lunch. I'd practice all afternoon unless I had a lesson with Gigliotti. Evenings Gayle, who was old enough to buy beer, would take up a collection and return with a case of Tiger Ale for six bucks and we would drink beer and play chess until it was time to sleep. Some nights we went to Robin Hood Dell for a Philadelphia Orchestra concert, but mostly we drank beer and played chess.

One night coming home from a Robin Hood Dell concert, Martha, a flautist, said we should stop at this clam bar where she had dined with her boyfriend. We stopped and I had a plate of fried clams. They didn't agree with me at all. In the morning I was sick as a dog. During one episode I had to use the bathroom. The door was closed, but I charged in and barely made the commode in time. Jon K. was in the bathroom.

While I buried my head in my hands in embarrassment, Jon stood stark naked shaving. Now Jon was a real pretty boy. His best feature was his incredible head of thick blond hair. It made his head look three sizes too large for his body. He spent a lot of time grooming.

He was vain and took great pride in his selection of suits, ties and perfectly starched shirts. I assumed that since he was a pantyhose salesman, he had to look sharp.

I was not prepared for what happened while I agonized on the bowl. After he finished shaving he put on a jock strap. Over this he put a pair of pantyhose. Then he put on a T-shirt and a heavily starched white dress shirt. He then put on his suit trousers; socks, shoes, and a flashy tie that looked like it belonged on a black pimp.

“Jesus, Jon, I’m sorry. Those clams didn’t agree with me.”

“Well, I’m in a hurry, I don’t have time for niceties.”

“Do you always wear pantyhose over a jock?”

“Hey I have to convince these women that it’s a good deal to buy pantyhose. No garter belts, no girdles, just wear panties and pantyhose; or don’t wear panties and only pantyhose. There is a new garment coming out soon that is all in one, panties and hose. My demonstrating the product makes the sale.”

“Isn’t that a little embarrassing? You know, dropping trou and showing your bum with a jock under the pantyhose?”

“Works every time. Best marketing there is.”

“Well, whatever works.”

“Hey, Ben, until I did this, I never made a sale. Now I’m top salesman. Those black ladies in the slums love seeing my white Finnish ass. They want to know how a guy with no hams can deliver a decent fuck.”

“You screw black women?”

“When you try chocolate, vanilla loses all charm.”

I couldn’t hold back. I unleashed an explosion of sound and smell.

“Jesus, Ben. You could at least wait until I left the room.”

“Sorry, Jon. The clams are in control.”

There were two problems with sleeping on the couch. The living room was your home and it was a public space with lots of coming and going. The second problem was you had to answer the

telephone. All the residents were also free-lance musicians, so there was many phone calls. Since Jon was a salesman, he received the lion's share of the telephone calls.

A typical phone call:

"Hello"

"I need to speak to Mr. K."

"He's out of the office at the moment. May I take a message?"

"You tell that honky motherfucker that the pantyhose he sent me don't fit over my big black ass."

"Yes ma'am. I will give him the message. Please give me your name and telephone number and he will call you as soon as he returns."

"You tell him, I'm no skinny-ass white girl. I need room. You hear, *room!*"

"Yes, ma'am.

Jon would arrive home, take my written messages and make the calls. Whatever he said seemed to work because I would soon after get this typical call.

"Hello"

"I want to speak with Mr. K."

"He's out of the office at the moment. We expect him back later this afternoon."

"Well, you tell Mr. Short-Dick that the new pantyhose arrived and I love them. I need four more pairs. The same size, no skinny butt ones.

"Yes, ma'am. Give me your name and telephone number and he will get back to you as soon as he returns to the office.

I would resume practicing.

To all of us living at the apartment, the thought of Jon dropping trou in a black woman's apartment to demonstrate pantyhose was hilarious. Jon didn't find it funny at all.

"It's a job."

“Hey, the jock covers your cock and balls, but not your ass. I think those women are in love with your white ass.”

“You guys are sick mothers.”

“Jon, how come you don't wear your pantyhose around the apartment?”

“Yeah, Jon. Why hasn't some big black dude arrived home and found you with your trou around your ankles?”

“Fuck you guys. Modeling the pantyhose is part of the job. I'm the best salesman they have. Even the sales women don't know enough to *wear* the product and model it for customers.

“What does your girlfriend think of you dropping trou and modeling pantyhose to poor women in the slums?”

“I don't tell her, and if any of you do, you're out of here so fast your ass will burn from the heat.”

Shortly afterward I left for Tanglewood in Lennox, Massachusetts. I told a few people about my Philadelphia experience. Everyone thought it was pretty funny, but most found it incredulous.

My girlfriend that summer was a harpist. One night she gave me some pantyhose and asked that I put them on. I thought she was drunk, but we had a good sex life so I complied. When I lifted her skirt, she was wearing nothing but a jock. We got into it and then I realized that whoever invented the pantyhose must have hated sex. Before pantyhose, a girl could ditch her panties and be ready for action. Garter belts or girdles and stockings were no impediment. If there was an interruption, well, just drop your skirt. There was nothing around your ankles.

Every time I'm with a woman and pantyhose is involved, I think of being in the bathroom on Locust Street in Philly with Jon as he pulled on the panty hose while I unleashed salvos of toxic fumes

