

“DOING LUNCH” WITH A MOVIE STAR AT THE POLO LOUNGE

Frances Roberts

We were driving along Sunset Boulevard on our way to lunch, Rhonda Fleming and I.

“Darling,” she said, “I’ve the most wonderful news!”

“That’s great.” I said, “What news?”

“Well, you know this absolutely marvelous man I’ve been seeing—you’ll never guess what he’s done!”

“No, Rhonda, I will never be able to guess.”

“Oh, try.”

“He’s taking you around the world on his yacht.”

“No, silly. I haven’t got the time right now. That new movie, you know. It’s much more important.”

“O.K. So what is it? I’m all ears.”

“It’s an island, darling. He’s given me an island off the coast of Florida. Isn’t that just absolutely fabulous?”

“Fabulous, Rhonda. What will you do with an island all your own?”

“Just wait till you hear what I’m going to do with it. You’ll love it!”

“You’ll become a famous castaway and play Robina Crusoe and make a film out of it?”

“No, this is serious. I’m going to do something for you and all those children.”

“Wait a minute. Me and which children?”

“I’m not fooling. I’ve had the most fantastic idea, darling, just wait till you hear what it is!”

By this time, we’d arrived at the Beverly Hills Hotel and the valet was ready to park the car. The guy’s eyes were popping out as this gorgeous red-headed star stepped out under the portico, but he was also such a cool cat from seeing so many Hollywood celebrities that he just blinked and took the keys.

At the famous Polo Lounge inside the hotel, it was a different story. The maitre d’ was marvelously obsequious and swept all before us to lead us to a booth where

visibility to the rest of the room was maximum. This was my first outing in a public place with Rhonda and I'd forgotten what that meant.

You've seen owls on film or in a tree: they seem to have swivel heads. Well, every head in the restaurant emulated that of the owl. Even the agents on their telephones (phone cords snaked a trail to every other table in those pre-cell-phone days) stopped talking to ogle and admire. Rhonda's smile was dazzling, the red hair was appropriately tossed, the huge eyes sparkled. If ever there was a movie star in all-stops-out motion, this was it.

When we were seated, and the adoring waiter had taken our order, I said, "OK, Rhonda, what's the idea for the island?"

"We'll make it a summer camp for cerebral palsied children!"

I gulped. "A summer camp on an island – for children with cerebral palsy?"

"Yes. Darling, isn't that a wonderful idea?"

I must explain that the choice of these children was natural, because for some time Rhonda had been appearing as a spokesperson for United Cerebral Palsy, a client for whom I did broadcast materials and publicity. In those days in the 60s, and I suppose it's still true, in Hollywood you had to have stars to hawk your product if you were running a charitable organization. I saw to it that they appeared, personally or on film, as guests on TV programs, and in public service announcements on radio or TV. I scheduled these freebies for many stars, and for perhaps ten different worthy causes. Each star often appeared all during whatever month was assigned nationally to whatever charity I was pushing at the time. Rhonda had visited the United Cerebral Palsy workshop, which was devoted to giving work to those who were afflicted with CP, as we called it. There, she saw young people of all types and colors, with varying degrees of injury caused by the birth damage that had created their problem in the first place. And being a most sympathetic woman, she had really taken to this charity in earnest. She may have been persuaded to choose it because of Dorothy Ritter, Tex's incredibly beautiful wife and John's mother, who was one of our permanent movers and shakers, since the Ritters also had a son with cerebral palsy.

Whatever. Now we had an island to discuss.

"Rhonda," I said, "It's a perfectly lovely idea, but there might be some problems."

"Well, we can manage problems, I'm sure of it."

"How do you get to this island? Is there a ferryboat?"

"I don't think so."

"You haven't seen it yet?"

“No, but we’re going there soon. On his yacht. And I’ve got the title! I really own it!”

“That’s great. Do you know how big it is?”

“Oh, I know it’s big enough for a camp.”

“That’s encouraging. Is it big enough for planes to land? Like...if there’s no ferryboat?”

“I don’t think so. But we could use helicopters!”

“I’d have to think about that. We’d need to find out if we can get things like bulldozers in to build a helipad.”

“Oh, I’m sure that wouldn’t be a problem. We could use the bulldozers to build a campsite and put up tents and maybe even cabins, and a big meeting room for entertainments. We could get all kinds of stars involved. That would be absolutely fabulous—entertainers could fly in and do shows for them. And, you know, we could have a cook tent and barbecues. They’d have a wonderful time, and it would be so good for them.”

“These are often very handicapped children, Rhonda. I’m not sure it would really be practical to get them onto transport that wouldn’t be quite equipped for wheelchairs or crutches or people who can’t walk very well. And they’d be far from immediate medical care in case of emergencies.”

“Oh, dear, you’re such a pessimist. Just think about it, how it would brighten their lives. I would be a really dear thing to do for those darling children.”

“Let’s think about it, Rhonda.”

But of course we never did. I went back to my humdrum life dealing with a circus of bedazzling people whose schedules had to be juggled constantly, and tempers soothed, and teleprompters arranged for. Rhonda went back to being a movie star, and our paths didn’t really re-cross much after that. But sometimes, just sometimes, the thought has crossed my mind that I didn’t do the right thing. In my habit of being my usual practical self—“you can’t do that because there are just too many obstacles to overcome, etc,” I erred. I shouldn’t have brought up those practicalities that are so boring and so limiting.

If I’d only encouraged her, it might really have happened. For that, Rhonda, I apologize profusely. I was wrong not to encourage it, and you were a darling.

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