

Outcast (5's a Crowd)

By Susan Pohlmann

In 1977 I was a waitress/manager at Ruskay's restaurant, on Columbus Avenue and 75th Street. At the time there weren't any upscale restaurants on Columbus above 72nd street: the area was segueing from its Needle Park phase into the Boutique period. No one at that time could have foreseen that someday Columbus Avenue between 68th and 78th streets would become the high-end shopping mall it is today.

But back in 1977 Ruskay's was an island in a sea of barber shops and bodegas and it wasn't uncommon to see concentration camp tattoos on the arms of older shopkeepers and barbers. A few places served the growing Yuppie population - The Cherry, a Japanese-American diner, and Miss Grimble, which offered Hungarian pastries - but these amenities co-existed easily with the shade-tree mechanics and domino-players on Columbus and Amsterdam.

Ruskay's was a destination for local celebrities, many of whom lived in the Dakota, at 72nd and CPW: John & Yoko showed up regularly for brunch as well as Pacino, Streep and assorted other Lincoln Center/ Shakespeare-in-the-Park performers.

Like its sister-restaurant in Chelsea, the Empire Diner, Ruskay's stayed open all night. Its booths, dim lighting and glass tables lent themselves to the drug du jour, cocaine. Upstairs, unbeknownst to all but the cognoscenti, there was a bathroom with a two-way mirror (conceived by Carl, one of the owners, as a means by which guys could gauge other guys' trick-worthiness.) Indeed, the restaurant walls were covered with mirrors, allowing patrons to cruise...while tucking into a porkburger (another one of Carl's innovations).

In the beginning of Saturday Night Live's second season Ruskay's suddenly became The Hot Place for their after-parties. Its location - a few blocks north of 72nd street and a disco called Trax - made it the ideal place for a post-show dinner and assorted-substance pre-gaming. There were lots of stories - many of them actionable even today - but I will relay one of the less-salacious ones here.

On this particular Saturday night, a fleet of limos showed up in front of the restaurant sometime around ten. We'd been tipped off by an SNL functionary, so we cleared the upstairs tables and laid in extra supplies of Remy.

What I remember particularly about this night is that a season newcomer, Bill Murray, was quite taken with Marianne Solicito, one of our waitresses. Now Marianne was a Jersey girl with pop star aspirations: her parents had underwritten a demo-tape that she was promoting to anyone who might do her some Good. With that object in mind, Marianne made sure that she got the Saturday night shift. She was gunning for Ackroyd or Belushi, both of whom had shown some interest in her at previous after-parties.

Marianne was not model-pretty, but she was small and dark and she had that get-able quality

that is so irresistible to successful former dorks. Anyway, to Marianne's chagrin, Ackroyd was absent that night and Belushi was not as attentive as he'd been, times before. (Due no doubt to the fact that his wife was waiting impatiently for him in the limo - tho Marianne had no way of knowing that.)

Bill had come in Belushi's limo: as a part-time cast member, he didn't rate his own. As I was soon to discover, Bill's object was to lure Marianne into Belushi's limo, whisk her to Trax, and presumably from there to paradise. Marianne was cool to Bill's spaniel-like charms, but Belushi's limo was irresistible.

Since she didn't yet know about the waiting wife, she implored me to go with her: to distract The Pup while she schmoozed The Star. So there was Bill, wheedling Belushi for a 3-block ride to a disco and Marianne likewise trying to turn the evening to good account. I figured it would make for a good opportunity to drop some names and since my shift was ending, I agreed to be part of the Foursome.

Once we were hustled into the limo, it became clear that the cozy foursome was, instead, an awkward fivesome. The Wife had been kicking her heels for close to an hour and she was in no mood to party. In retrospect, seeing her husband appear with two 23- year- old females and a hyperactive 30-year-old teenager probably didn't do much for her mood. Bill greeted her like a naughty puppy, apologizing for making her wait.

"Hey, let's all go to Trax- it'll be fun!"

Silence.

"C'mon, it's just around the corner!"

"Then why don't you walk? We're going home."

More awkward silence. At this point, Marianne opened the door of the limo and got out. Clearly, this was not the best time to pitch her demo-tape and there were still a few Hot Prospects left in the restaurant. I needed no more hints to secure my position as Persona non-grata. Sliding across the seat after Marianne, I told my stationary co-passengers that I'd be fine walking home: my apartment was just a few blocks uptown.

"We're heading uptown, we'll drop you," Belushi offered.

So I can truthfully say that once, when I was young, I rode around Manhattan in a limo with John Belushi and Bill Murray. My grandchildren won't be impressed, tho they may ask me if Bill Murray was in that old movie where this guy wakes up to the same day every day and isn't there something about a groundhog?

Ruskay's fame as an SNL after-party destination proved to be short-lived. The following season

the Upper West Side was passed over for trendier Soho and TriBeCa. Judging from the fact that Marianne Solicito is not a household name, her search for international pop star fame was in vain.

The following season Bill Murray was promoted to regular cast member status with, presumably, his own limo. Poor Marianne: if only she'd known.