

*Bonnie St. John is a writer and motivational speaker.*

### **At the Nag's Head**

Bonnie St. John

“Bah-nny....Sah haint...Jah-han.” When the syllables of my name were uttered, I didn’t recognize them at first. It was as if the world slowed and I was caught in some parallel universe.

“Me? Me?” I was truly shocked. The poor, little, crippled, black girl that the San Diego School District wanted to send to a “special” school, was granted this illustrious honor – to “fight the world’s fight” as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford– and it wasn’t going to cost me a penny!

You have to understand that I never had enough money to do anything. Our family sometimes had to eat canned soups and powdered milk for a few days until Mom got her next paycheck because there was nothing left for groceries. I went through Harvard in three years instead of four because I was afraid that we would run out of money before I graduated, despite the generous scholarship. Even when I made it to the Olympics, I wore other people’s cast off ski clothes and mismatched gloves that I had gotten out of the “lost and found” at ski areas. I almost didn’t even make it to the Rhodes interview because I was broke. Now, thanks to the generous legacy of an early 20<sup>th</sup> Century philanthropist, all my bills would be paid...with a liberal stipend to boot! For the first time in my whole life, I didn’t have to worry about money at all.

Nine months after that fateful moment, I arrived at Trinity College. Almost immediately I set out to soak up every drop of this spectacular opportunity. I was out of bed at 5am every morning to row for one of many Trinity crew teams and was toying with the idea of joining either debate or theatre.

But what usually happens when you think you have it made? The rug has a nasty habit of flying out from under your feet when you least expect it...

My mouth was watering, thinking about tea and butter-soaked crumpets at the “Nag’s Head” pub where I was meeting up with Susan, Terri, and Lisa, the three African-American women who would become my buds, my pals, my “peeps” in Oxford, and later, my lifelong friends.

As I was crossing the threshold of the main gate, my favorite porter, Colin, handed me a note that would send my carpet to the moon. The note was from my tutor, and outlined that I had been denied admission into my chosen course of study, the M.Litt. in Economics, and instead, enrolled in an undergraduate program: PPE or Politics, Philosophy, and Economics.

I trudged through town without even noticing the ancient spires peaking out from behind double-decker, red buses loaded with rubbernecking tourists. How could Oxford do this to me? I had graduated with honors from Harvard having taken almost all my classes in politics, economics and philosophy! PPE would be virtually the same degree over again. I would waste two years here and return with no graduate degree!

As I walked, I let myself feel frightened and helpless for a few minutes and then grabbed myself by the scruff of my neck and asked, "Now what are you going to do?" I brainstormed all the things I could do to change the situation and began to feel confident and strong. By the time I arrived at the Nag's Head, I had formulated a plan to challenge Oxford's decision. They might have thought I wasn't good enough, but I became determined to prove them wrong.

I was so happy to see my friends, knowing they would support me.

"Can you believe they are doing this to me?" I told them. "They demoted me from a graduate to an undergrad!"

After listening to my crisis, and appropriately commiserating, my friends told me *their* big news.

"Hey, Bonnie," said Terri, "this will cheer you up...we are going to put on a play! We're going to do *Colored Girls!* It's gonna be great."

The groundbreaking literary masterpiece, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow is Enuf*, by Ntozake Shange, is structured in the form of twenty "choreopoems" that offer beautifully stylized depictions of the gut-wrenching stories of seven women known only as the Lady in Red, the Lady in Orange, the Lady in Blue, etc., each representing a different color of the

rainbow. The chance to play one of these women, alongside my new friends, was almost too exciting to bear.

But I felt a million miles away. All my mind was doing was calculating how much time it would take to get involved in this little theatrical undertaking. Hours upon hours of rehearsals. Performances.... Ahhhhhh! How can I get involved in this? I have to do research. I have to focus. I have to take on Oxford University itself!

So I declared “martial law” on myself. I dropped the crew team, crossed theater and debate off my list, and relegated myself to the library. I reapplied for the degree program. I found an economics tutor who would agree to oversee my research and convince the committee to accept me. I got a private tutor in math and statistics. I continued attending the lectures as if I had already been accepted.

It took me four years to do the two-year program, but I got my Masters in Economics. Finally, I won. Or did I?

Now, when I look back, I actually feel quite sick. At long last, I had been granted the opportunity to enjoy a relatively carefree life and I threw it away within the first week. Over the course of my life, I can't see one job or one opportunity I would have missed out on if I had done PPE instead of Econ.

I thought that what got me through my degree program was shutting out life and working myself to the bone. But I was way too emotionally handicapped to realize what was really going on. Looking back all these years later, I see that I could never have survived that academic environment, colder than the bone-chilling dampness of the British climate, nor those professors, more forbidding than the hideous gargoyles hovering over the medieval buildings, without the emotional strength, support, and perspective of my girl gang. I will never forget what they did for me.

Even though I shut down emotionally and withdrew into my work, my girlfriends, Susan, Terri, and Lisa, didn't let me get away so easily. They continued to include me in our tradition of

Wednesday lunch. They dragged me out, sometimes kicking and screaming, to watch the performances of Colored Girls and a whole host of other extracurricular activities I had dismissed as folly. Thank God.

In the end, I can claim victory. I wrestled my way back into the program and completed my M.Litt. in Economics. But if I had it to do all over again, I would have stayed in PPE, grabbed onto everything Oxford has to offer with both hands, and definitely would have played the Lady in Yellow.

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