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PHOTOGRAPH • CLAUDE MUGUIN HAIR • STEPHEN KNOLL MAKEUP • JOSE BONOMO STYLING • BARBARA DENTE

an evening with DONNA MILLS

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E'D MET HER ONCE before—on something of a pre-date. It was to be a fast drink on Madison Avenue, hello-goodbye, then home to our tuna salad and Budweiser. But before we knew it, we were lost in her sky-blue eyes. We boldly asked her to dinner and drove to a seafood restaurant in Brooklyn, where one of the waiters, a Haitian, not only recognized her from *Knots Landing* but remembered the name of the screenwriter of one of her long-ago movies. Only in America. After that we had a nightcap at a too-trendy café in SoHo, where she told us of her Catholic girlhood in Chicago. A plan was hatched. We would meet in the Windy City and there she would take us around and show us the old house, her high school, where she had been young and sassy, and the streets in which she used to play.

Weeks later she flew east from Beverly Hills, we came west from Manhattan, and we checked into separate rooms at the Whitehall hotel. We arranged to meet in the bar. As always, we got there early, killing time by studying the cocktail waitress (an Amanda Blake look-alike), who asked the bartender for “a sloe screw—that’s sloe gin and orange juice with Galliano, darling.”

The sound of heads snapping caused us to turn. Donna Mills was making her entrance, radiantly. She was dressed in a pink angora sweater (“but a modern version, not what a poodle would wear,” she explained), gray silk trousers, and silver sandals as towering as the Hancock building. To folks at the bar, to anyone who had seen her as the combustible Abby Cunningham on the *Dallas* spin-off—J.R. once came over to *Knots Landing* to have an affair with her—Donna is pure steam. Reality’s another drama. She’s in fact a delicate wisp of a woman, soft-spoken, considerate. “I’m glad you’re not

wearing a dark jacket,” she said as she politely *pfifted* some pink fuzz from her lips.

Dinner was at Le Perroquet, a grand, gracious place. We chatted in the corner over duck—“It’s done just right, rare, like the French do it,” she observed—and a bottle of Château Beychevelle. Preparing for the next day’s this-is-your-life-Donna Mills tour, we asked about her school days. “I wouldn’t say I was stuck-up exactly,” she told us. “My Taft High School yearbook said I was ‘sophisticated,’ which, ha-ha, you probably think is very funny. But it’s true: I was an early bloomer. By the time I was eleven I was as fully developed as I am now, one of the two tallest [five feet four inches] girls in grade school. By the time I got to Taft I was being asked out by college boys. I was also a torch singer, if you can believe it. I came out in a slinky black dress and did bluesy stuff, like ‘*Lover Man*.’”

After kiwi-sherbet balls and coffee, we left to catch the late show at Second City, the famed satirical revue. While Donna found the cast (which included Jim Belushi—John’s brother) attractive and energetic, she came away a little disappointed. We agreed entirely. Fortunately, as far as Second City is concerned, we were in the minority.

Donna now suggested we drop by a New Wave bar we’d heard about, a joint called Neo. There was at least one moment to remember. When Donna went off to the ladies’ room, a gorilla as tall as the Sears Tower—he wore a leather jacket and leather pants and had covered his face with Vaseline—glowered at us and sat down on Donna’s vacated barstool. “You ain’t so tough,” we muttered under our breath, praying he would ask somebody to dance before Donna returned. (He did, miraculously.) Not wishing to press our luck, we finished our drinks and headed back to the hotel, where we walked Donna to her room, kissed her goodnight, and went back to our own. For an hour we lay in bed and tried to figure out what the Vaseline was for.

The next morning Donna came by for us at ten and we made tracks to her alma mater, a yellow-brick high school some fifteen miles northwest of the Loop. We’d

arranged for pictures to be taken here, so Donna clowned around in front of the graffiti-covered walls. All the while she offered her high school memoirs, telling us about an English teacher who "was shaped like a Coke bottle," about her home economics teacher Mrs. Nielsen, who "taught me how to make an apron," about a drama teacher who "threatened not to pass me unless I kissed a boy onstage." After four years of this rigorous learning, Donna went on to even higher education at the University of Illinois.

Five blocks away was Donna's childhood manse, a two-story brick house with a small lawn in front (the cherry tree Donna remembered was missing from the back).

Spinning around the old neighborhood, we found ourself musing on the issue of celebrity in America, wondering if any of the residents in this quiet section of town were aware that the torchy lady they watched Thursday nights was in fact the same bubbly little girl who used to race up and down driveways and skip to school on cold, gray mornings. "I often wonder what would have happened to me if I'd never left Chicago," Donna said. "I wonder if I would have turned out like so many other girls I knew. They married early, had kids. They still live close by. But, you know, I never really had any doubt that I would go off someplace. I seem to have been sure."

We offered our own scenario, telling

ventured, she'd grow tired of the scene and move someplace warm ... Tucson, maybe, where she'd meet a considerate widower and live out her days in a ranch house by a golf course.

Donna listened closely, amused at our presumption. "That's interesting" was all she said.

Now came the moment we'd been waiting for. Did she tell us we were the most sensitive guy she'd ever known? Did we exchange breathless vows of eternal love? Did we go for a legendary Chicago pizza, over which we made plans for a honeymoon? Better than that: we sped toward Wrigley Field, a shrine that had never much figured in Donna's past but was

mightily important to ours. Many were the summer afternoons we sat in front of *our* brick house, in Philly, and listened to the hapless Phils trying to lose to the hapless Cubs, and vice versa. (We still recall Teddy Kazanski's inside-the-park home run; we still believe we actually *saw* it.) But Donna was not all that wild about sitting in the cold, so we tried to cheer and warm her by buying her a Cubs sweat shirt and plenty of good eats: ball-park nachos, hot dogs, french fries, peanuts, and several cups of black coffee. She also kept warm by signing scorecards for a bunch of teenage girls. "Ooooh, you're the *very* best one in the show, you really are," they told her. (God knows, they didn't have anything else to squeal about: the Cubs were dropping yet another one, this to our presently hapful Phillies.)

That night Donna invited us along to have dinner with Aunt Elaine McCaffery, who made a rare trip into town to see her celebrity niece. The three of us ate pasta. We spent part of the time assuring Aunt Elaine that *Esquire* was not one of *those* magazines, never was, and that Donna's business with us would probably not result in her eternal damnation. We tried to get Elaine to tell us what Donna was

like as a little girl, but she wouldn't. "Let's just say she was a real Sarah Bernhardt and leave it at that." Donna gave us a look, a real Abby Cunningham. Then we all walked back to the hotel, where Elaine would spend the night with Donna and drive her to the airport the next morning.

No big ending this time. No chorale of angels, no foggy runway, no shuffling off into the sunset with our collar turned up. We'd simply had a good time, warm and easy, clean as a whistle. Yup, that's the way it turned out. Damn you, J.R. **E**



"Gee, it used to seem so *big*," she murmured as she leaned out the car window to take snapshots with the little Olympus she'd brought along. "I remembered it as being up on a big hill, but obviously, that's no hill, that's a lawn." Indeed, the knoll stretched to the height of ten shallow concrete steps, ending in front of an aluminum storm door with doves on it. As we drove away, Donna remained vaguely stunned, though alert enough to point out the neighbors' homes she remembered: the Warners, the Forsbergs, the Gobels, and the Bogrens....

Donna that she probably would have been snapped up by a Windy City high roller, a guy in a white Caddy most likely, who would have lavished opals and minks on her until... until one day the feds showed up to take him away on... on tax evasion charges. Donna smiled at this. Then we went on to say how she would have taken her small child and moved into a one-bedroom apartment on Lake Shore Drive, probably working as a... as a club singer at a piano bar in one of the hotels. There'd be a couple of serious affairs, though she'd keep them at arm's length. Eventually, we

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