

## Her dust is very pretty

Back in the early 60's I ran away to New York from my home in the mid-west, like so many of my generation of young women wannabe writers. We started out waiting tables, checking hats, or other low-paying jobs until we wrote that prize-winning book or film script that would make us famous. And rich. Most of us ended up as copywriters in ad. agencies on Madison Avenue writing deathless prose about motor oil or laundry detergent.

A job I had when I first arrived was waiting tables at a nice little club in Manhattan. Most of the clientele were monied widows who came to spend their time and their dead husbands' cash on a few rounds of gin cocktails and a few hands of gin rummy.

There was one widow I adored. I recognised her immediately. She had died black hair scraped severely back, a face that had lived hard, and deep-set hooded dark eyes that had seen things - but would often twinkle with laughter. It was the legendary writer and wit, Dorothy Parker.

"Good morning Mrs Parker," I'd say to her. "Would you like another martini?" She'd look at me and laugh. "You want me to say it don't you?" I'd laugh right back at her and nod.

*I like to have a martini  
Two at the very most  
Three I'm under the table  
Four I'm under the host*

"Four martinis coming right up Mrs Parker."

Sometime she'd be leafing through a glossy magazine, and point out the latest celebrity starlet to me and pronounce:

*Beauty is only skin deep, but ugly goes clean to the bone.  
Or: You can lead a horticulture, but you can't make her think.*

Although it was frowned upon by management to become too friendly with the clientele, Mrs Parker and I actually got quite chummy. When she learned I had ambitions to become a writer she brought that well-known epigram out of her memory bank:

*"If you have any young friends who aspire to become writers, the second greatest favour you can do them is to present them with copies of The Elements of Style. The first greatest, of course, is to shoot them now, while they're happy."*

Often she would have a few old friends with her, mostly men. They would pay court and reminisce about the good old days back in the 30's at the Algonquin Hotel. I had read about the notorious Algonquin round table where a sophisticated group of New York writers

lunched and engaged in wisecracks and wordplay. These clever retorts usually ended up in one or other of the publications they wrote for. The queen bee of the round table was Dorothy Parker and her killer quips became legendary.

The current entourage would encourage her to repeat her famous witty remarks and I'd make sure I was in earshot to hear those shards of wisdom from her own lips.

Her acolytes would feed her lines: "So what did you do this morning Dorothy..." And she'd come back with:

*The first thing I do in the morning is brush my teeth and sharpen my tongue.*

... and they'd howl with laughter as though this was the first time they'd ever heard this quip.

"And Dorothy have you read the latest best seller by (whomever the writer du jour was)" they'd ask, keenly anticipating the response.

*This is not a novel to be tossed aside lightly. It should be thrown with great force.*

I liked it best when she settled into the booth on her own and I had the chance to have a chat. She was interested in my love life and reminded me:

*I require three things in a man: he must be handsome, ruthless, and stupid.*

But it was also somehow slightly tragic, in a sort of Norma Desmond/Sunset Boulevard way, that she was living on her past reputation as a raconteur and satirist. Her mind was still good but had lost that razor-sharpness that had served her as a writer, poet, reviewer and scriptwriter in her career. Nevertheless, I relished the opportunity to be briefly in her orbit.

I was getting serious with the young man I had mentioned to her (and for whom I had taken her advice that *brevity is the soul of lingerie*) and he took me back home to Cleveland where we married and settled down. I called my first daughter Dorothy.

She probably never thought she would make old bones, especially when you read some of her poetry about death and suicide. But Dorothy died in June 1967, aged 73. I read recently that her ashes had finally found their resting place after many years, and one of her poems was carved on the headstone:

*Leave for her a red young rose; Go your way, and save your pity; She is happy, for she knows that her dust is very pretty."*