



Babs Simpson, Bon Vivreur

BY HOLLY BRUBACH

Babs Simpson, née Beatrice Crosby de Menocal, was born in 1913 in Peking, to a Cuban father and an American mother, and carried in a laundry basket aboard the trans-Siberian railway en route to the U.S. Her childhood was spent abroad, wherever her father's career in international banking took the family. When she was ten, they settled in Boston, where Babs was sent to private schools and later met her husband, William Simpson, a student at Harvard. They moved to New York and after seven years divorced, in 1941. At which point, Babs enrolled in secretarial school. "Because, needless to say, I knew nothing."

Syrie Maugham suggested that Babs go see about a job with Plucer, a photographer for *Harper's Bazaar*. He hired her to run his studio; his assistant was the young Francesco Scavullo. Fulco di Verdura—jewellery designer, man about town, friend and prankster—used to call impersonating famous people. One day the voice at the other end of the phone claimed to be Carmel Snow, the *Bazaar's* editor. "Oh, fuck off, Fulco, I'm busy," Babs replied. In fact, it was Carmel Snow, who, apparently undeterred, recruited her as a junior fashion editor under Diana Vreeland. Gridlock at the top of the masthead eventually prompted Babs to move on to *Vogue*. Among the photographers she worked with over her long career: Louise Dahl-Wolfe, Irving Penn, Richard Avedon, Cecil Beaton, Norman Parkinson, Erwin Blumenfeld, John Rawlings.

It was Rawlings' wife who persuaded Babs to adopt Tico, her pet troupiel (pictured above, atop Babs' head). He took it upon himself to ward off male admirers. "One night in Jamaica, I put him in a drawer. With his strong beak, he got out and attacked the poor man I was in bed with until he drew blood through the sheet."

In time, Babs lost interest in fashion and transferred to *House & Garden*, where she remained until the magazine closed in 1993. She now resides in a chic retirement home in Rye, New York, where this conversation took place.

"Ask me anything," Babs says. "I have no shame."

Any regrets?

Not really. I just wish I'd been a nicer person.

What advice would you give your twenty-year-old self?

When I was twenty, I wasn't interested in advice. Everybody was raising hell. I celebrated the end of Prohibition with six boys I knew, and after a few drinks, we went to Scollay Square, where there were tattoo parlors. The idea was that each of them would have a letter tattooed on his hand, spelling R-E-P-E-A-L, and I would have the date tattooed on my knee. Thank God I came to my senses when the moment arrived. Last year I was in the hospital. Can you imagine having to explain the date on my knee to the surgeon?

Is there a gene for style?

Some people are born with it, and others learn. Vreeland had naturally great style. Very elegant.

"Elegant" is a word people don't use anymore.

Because they're not. They're not interested in elegance, either. I think what's happened to feet is so ghastly. You know how it all started? Gogo Schiaparelli, Elsa's daughter, had polio when she was little, and one leg was a tiny bit shorter than the other. Her mother didn't want her to feel ashamed, so she designed some platform shoes—one of them was built up on the inside. So platform shoes as we all know became very fashionable, and look what they've turned into. Today they all look like prosthetics.

What is the cure for a broken heart?

The next man.

Some people seem young for their years, others grow old prematurely.

How do you account for age?

It's the age you are in your mind that matters. In my mind, I'm in my forties or fifties, the time when I was working.

Any unfinished business?

A whole lot of things I want to read. I don't feel that I've come to the end of my interest, so it's just a question of how long the body will last.

Finish this sentence: "If I had it to do all over again, I would..."

Do it all over again.