INTERVIEW I

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INTERVIEWEE: FLEUR COWLES

INTERVIEWER: Harry Middleton

PLACE: Bauer House, the University of Texas at Austin

Tape 1 of 2, Side I

M: We have just been through a very exciting symposium at the University of Texas that you were responsible for inaugurating, and Tom Staley and his genius was responsible for executing. I think it is interesting and important to know how this all got started.

C: The magic of my connection with the university is one I can never undervalue. Through a great friend I was introduced to Tom Staley and that introduction led to the academic honors and the life which I now lead with such pride.

In the University of Texas at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center there is now an exact copy of my study, the London room in which I write and work. I say "exact" because it took almost a year for gifted and dedicated people from the university to reconstruct it, bit by bit: the walls, carpet, furniture, bric-a-brac, paintings, books, photographs, and the paraphernalia of my writing life. Left out is the one description which makes it into a "work" room - its crowded busy-ness. In the university, it is quiet and beautiful, without the endless papers and collected nonsense that accumulates in London. In Austin, its "busy-ness" is created by constant use, which make me happy:

this reconstituted Fleur Cowles room "lives."

The university had two other great decisions with which it has honored me; the most important of all which was the announcement of the Fleur Cowles Fellowship for the Humanities, now in its second year, for which postgraduate students are chosen from all over the globe - in perpetuity - which means that my name will exist for students long after I'm gone. They will study what matters most to me, the three elements of my career: art, literature, and publishing. The university also made me an honorary member of its council as well as on their of their other Texas universities.

Conversations then led to: "what now?" Between Tom Staley and me, it was decided that it would be right to have regular discussions of importance featured in the Harry Ransom Institute [Center] as often as possible. It was Tom Staley's final generous and flattering idea to do this every two years - and to name it the Flair Symposium. This overall reason for me to be honored by the university dates back to 1950, when I created *Flair* magazine which he loved and still loves. All these honors are related to the fact that forty-five years ago that magazine was born and made publishing history by its innovations, so he decided that the symposiums must be in it its name.

Last night was the end of the first of the Flair Symposia - one that was dedicated to discovering, predicting and analyzing "the future of the printed word." I have lived by the printed word but I'm not the thoroughly modern Millie that people think because *I love the printed word more than any computer*. I have great concern over the fact that the printed word might somehow become less important. This symposium was designed to discuss this menace, if menace it might become. We invited many of the world's best

minds. For two days - when these experts gave us their views and participation: the world of the printed word and their thoughts for the future. The audience was awed - awed by the erudition in simple language which flowed from the podium.

Proudly, I was able to produce three of the great personalities of the event: first, the man who opened it, Simon Jenkins, former editor of the London *Times*, considered a "big brain" in England. He began by insisting, thank goodness, that there should be no worry about the printed word - that it will never, never disappear. TV didn't kill it when it magically appeared, he reminded us.

Another great contributor was my friend Jerome S. Rubin, Chairman of the MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] Media Laboratory and inventor of Lexis and Nexis [LexisNexis], who described what the computer already has for us as information and literature.

The symposium was concluded by that great intellectual, Carlos Fuentes - another very close and dear friend, whom I persuaded to find time to come and give the audience a summary. Of course a summary means recalling and giving credit to every speaker, commenting about each contribution. He gave us that - certainly - but we also got Fuentes' incredible erudition, with his unique speaking facility, about this history of the printed word expressed as only he could to it - leaving the audience breathless.

I've been to many, many lectures and public events, but I never before saw over five hundred people rise to their feet spontaneously to cheer a speaker. I believe Carlos Fuentes left the next morning a very proud man. I'm very grateful to him.

M: As one who was privileged to be there last night, and indeed through most of the

symposium, I echo and support those words wholeheartedly. I thought particularly Mr. Fuentes' presentation was masterful and elegant, and the kind of thing that people are not privileged often to hear. I'm awfully glad I was part of it.

The conference was called the Flair Symposium. As you said, it stems from a magazine that you were responsible for producing in New York many years ago. I am one of your fans who was there at the time. I was a young man in New York, and I remember quite well what a celebrity you were, and how glamorous you seemed to those of my generation.

C: Thank you.

M: Let's talk a little about *Flair*. Do you consider that to be the beginning of your career?

C: I may give it a much more pretentious definition; if so, do forgive it. I'd like to bring that idea up to date. I have done many things in my life: I've been an editor, publisher, writer, painter, traveler, diplomat, and friend-gatherer--one of the most important elements in my life. I have many things to be proud of, but since *Flair* appeared I have always considered it to be my real obit because, with its creation, I was able to reveal my own total innermost creativeness.

I was then married to the owner of *Look* magazine, who pursued me with great gallantry. I originally declined to marry him because I was secretly embarrassed by that publication. To me, *Look* was not good enough either for him or his reputation - and I didn't want to become a part of it. But when he promised he would come to live in New York to edit it personally, and improve it, I agreed to marry him. I became its associate editor which turned out to be a difficult situation as the boss's wife.

Look took a long time to improve its reputation although not with its original readers; there were many of those. It even used to make a million dollars a year in that original form! But too few advertisers graced its pages.

At one of the difficult stages, [Gardner] Mike Cowles admitted: "You are doing your best" to lift the pages of *Look* to a higher level"--the two of us ran *Look*--"but it is taking a long, long time. Advertisers don't realize that we are capable of making the necessary changes. If you'd like to create a new and elegant magazine - high-level, an expensively produced magazine - it would prove to the ad world that we do know how to do whatever it is we set out to do."

That invitation was a gift from the heavens, because although I was very proud of seriously helping to change the image of *Look*, that job couldn't give me an opportunity to deal with things that were my real aspirations.

Although I never gave up my role on *Look* I soon left for Europe to begin the formulation of a new magazine - one that didn't already exist. I needed to find the people who were publishing beautiful magazines and books to find out *how* they did them, *why* they did them - and *what* was necessary to do the same in America.

I not only discovered what I wanted to know to reproduce new things but found gifted people as well to bring to America. I spent the next six months persuading American producers to attempt to do by *machine* what had never before been done other than by *hand* in Europe.

The result was eclectic and interesting, an almost curious magazine not devoted just to fashion, or art, not just to travel or to theater, but to all these subjects and to

include literature.

I also wanted to appeal to readers of both sexes, men as well as women. I wanted to send them the joy of surprise in each issue, unlike some magazines whose content you pretty well know more or less what will be found on every page. *Flair* unexpectedly used *five* different kinds of paper in every issue, and *five* different types of production. One never knew what would be found inside except that there would always be half pages, quarter pages, tiny folders tucked in - and a book bound into every issue!

Many publications lived by the fame of their contributors. My ambition was to bring fame to new and unknown contributors. If one looks back at forty-five year old issues one can find, for instance, the first article by Tennessee Williams and many other creative people who became known in those pages. Many painters also grew famous - like Lucian Freud. I was the first to publish him in America in our first issue. Over thirty years later in London, when the Tate Gallery's retrospective exhibition of his work was news--critics calling him the greatest living English painter--in a most important review I found a reproduction of one of the very paintings I featured in *Flair* in February 1950. I am happy that I was able to give deserved recognition to so many.

Mike Cowles, in a widely circulated printed and signed announcement, guaranteed to the advertising world that he would keep *Flair* in print for at least three years. But sufficient advertising revenue did not arrive to help make up the cost between *Flair*'s selling price of fifty cents and its cost of a dollar sixty-five cents per copy.

Advertising simply stayed away. Competitive magazines had gotten to the ad world, admitting it was wonderful, imaginative and beautiful. "*But how long will it last*?"

they asked. They described it as a toy of a rich lady, predicting that some day very soon she would turn to other folly. Advertisers agreed to wait and see, sentencing it to death.

And at the end of one year--one, not three--Mike Cowles called *Flair* executives together, without warning, to announce that it was all over, that *Flair* would close the following week! You could row a boat in the tears that I shed at the blow. But I decided to patch up my wounds and to go on. I announced that there would be a *Flair Annual* every year.

I published the first *Annual* - not with a staff but with two greatly gifted former members of the original team, Federico Pallavacci [Pallavicini] and Robert Offergeld. There was never another one. In the meantime I had come to realize that Mike Cowles and I, while friends, somehow didn't see our lives together. We divorced and I left the United States to marry an Englishman.

May I tell some stories about *Flair*'s remarkable longevity - some stories close to fiction? *They happened*.

For instance: I was going to Seattle, some years ago to have an exhibition of my own painting in the Opera House at the opening of the season, and later to hang in the Seattle Art Museum. John McCone, who was then head of CIA, was meeting me there; it was his home town. In the airport, I found myself in a long queue at Customs. I [was?] longing to get to the top of it, not to keep that distinguished gentleman waiting. I was behind fifteen hippies, every one with assorted baggage. Every straw bag and every brown paper package was gone through minutely and slowly. I knew I would be very late so I quietly slipped out of the line to talk to the customs officer: "I don't want to be

rude, but a very important, older gentleman is waiting for me. *May I come next*?" He instantly curtly replied: "Certainly not."

I went back to my place, crestfallen. In about half an hour I reached the same man and held up my documents. I'd just come in from England.

He looked at that paper: "*You're Fleur Cowles*?" he almost shouted. "You're *Flair*. I do beg your pardon, just go through." That a very rude seemingly common gentleman knew my name and about *Flair* magazine which had already died at least twenty years before!

Another example is more dramatic: in South Africa, I unwittingly broke the law by having two guests in my car; one was a black man, the other was Father Trevor Huddleston, the brave priest who went there from England to try to help the blacks. The other man was actually a real-life hero in Alan Paton's book, *Cry the Beloved Country*.

Both black and white were together in my car, and we were noticed. This was an illegal act. I was breaking the law. A young reporter waited for me in my hotel to warn me: "*Get out of here - and go fast because there is a warrant out for your arrest*. You upset the authorities when you complained to the Minister of Education that you thought his theories were cruel and unkind. He has it in for you. *Get out*."

I packed fast and rushed to the airport where the young reporter had called other members of the press corps to meet me there. I asked him--he now lives and works in London--why was he so eager to save me from arrest? He answered "For a very good reason, a *very* good reason. I've just become engaged. I'm really a very poor person. The only thing I could afford to give my bride-to-be as an engagement gift was one copy

of *Flair*."

Tearfully, I tried to get on the plane, but the press demanded that I first give them an interview insisting that I had up to now refused one. "*Give it now*. You're leaving, you're safe. Say what you want."

"Okay. I've only been here three weeks, but perhaps I could tell you what every American, *back home*, thinks of the way most whites behave in your country." I gave them my own opinion, in bing-bang fashion, of the horrors I'd seen. I pretended I was just giving American opinion.

That interview changed a very tiny element of history. Having returned to the United States earlier than I expected, I telephoned Henry Cabot Lodge, the American ambassador to the United Nations, to say that I was unexpectedly back in the USA and to ask if I could still come, as usual, to his annual farewell dinner to the Security Council. "Great," he said, "do come."

To dine, there were two tables. I was seated two from the left of the hostess. An ambassador--unknown to me--at her left helped me into my chair, announcing curtly: "I've just had a report of every lie and every nasty thing you've had to say about my country."

"Oh," I said, "you must be from South Africa. If so, you may have the dinner for your rebuttal."

"I didn't come here to argue," he replied - and I said, "Nor did I come here to be insulted." I turned my back at him and never spoke to him again at the table.

He went to Mrs. Lodge to tell her he thought he'd been rude to me and would like

to apologize. "If you've been rude," she responded, "do come with me." As they turned toward me I announced firmly not to bother.

"Please," he replied, "may I just say three words?"

"If you keep it to three, do go ahead."

"*You are right*," he murmured quietly as he walked away.

I went the next day to Washington to see President [Dwight] Eisenhower to report that "we've got an ally in the UN, that the ambassador secretly agrees with our side." The President ordered the heat to be put on that man; it was done to such an extent he resigned. This tiny bit of South African history has to be credited to a young reporter's interest in *Flair*.

M: What year was that?

C: In the 1950s.

M: So it was Eisenhower in the White House.

C: Yes I was that crazy anomaly, only possible in America, the "personal ambassador" of President Eisenhower's. For him I journeyed to four countries. I came to know Nasser very well indeed because I regularly went to Egypt, saw him with his family in his home and grew to he trusted by him.

I also was able, through my friendship with the Shah, to bring him to America as a personal guest at a time when he couldn't be invited officially on a State visit because American oil operators were threatened to be ushered out of Iran. The President thought I might help get him into the Turkey-Pakistan pact.

I brought the Shah and Queen Soraya to the United States for difficult weeks! At

the end he could be invited informally to the White House and for serious, successful discussion.

For a year and a half I traveled back and forth to Greece, Cyprus and London during the difficult Turkish-Greek affair, which still rears its head. I did know just about all of importance in Greece, so I was useful.

M: Before I ask how your service with President Eisenhower began, I believe you also did some work for President Truman before that. Was it your *bona fides* as a journalist that got you started in the government?

C: No, it was in pre-journalism days, having had nothing to do with journalism but with what I value above all else in life - friendship. Working at speech-writing in Washington I had favorably caught the eye of the wonderful man, Eugene Meyer, owner of the *Washington Post*, father of the present owner, Katherine Graham. He was so close to Harry Truman that when Truman became president overnight, Mr. Meyer went quickly to suggest to him that the very first job he should consider was to feed Europe - *his first job*. He also suggested that President Truman invite President [Herbert] Hoover to come back to Washington to set up and chair the group he suggested be called the Famine Emergency Committee and then suggested that I be hired to help,

Truman did just that. He had never seen me before, but I was given the job as consultant to the Famine Emergency Committee and spent the first nine months of his presidency in the White House. I became what *Time* magazine likes to call "a great and good friend" of Harry Truman, a man for whom I have nothing but the highest esteem and admiration as well as affection.

With Eisenhower it was a different matter. Our first meeting came about because of the Republican Party's election strategy. Don't forget that I was married to a real Mr. Republican. We both went to Europe, like many others requested by the official party to persuade Eisenhower to become the Republican candidate, a thing he didn't want. In fact, the Democrats had the same scheme; they were trying to persuade him to become their candidate. We were just part of a parade of Republican personalities asked to do this job.

Instant friendship can occur; it worked at that visit. Eisenhower [was?] finally accepted as Republican candidate--it was to prevent Senator [Robert] Taft whom he thought was too right-wing--and he invited me on his campaign train. And when he became president, one of his earliest gestures was to send me as ambassador to the coronation of Elizabeth II. "Why not the coronation of a woman to be attended by a woman," Clare Luce had asked. General George Marshall went as his personal representative. We were a good team. That was the first of my ambassadorial jobs.

Eventually it became clear that if you are of any importance in the publishing world you do get to know most people. Doors open to you; you are wanted, you are needed. Many inside those doors became my *friends*. The President believed this sort of unofficial approach, one that might not be acceptable if used by the official ambassador on post, could be useful. I could seemingly ask inappropriate questions.

I was able to ask such impertinent questions in Cairo, Brazil, Cyprus and Iran. The American Ambassador to Egypt, Hank Byroade, was chosen by Secretary of State George Marshall - a genius of an idea because, like [Egyptian president Gamal Abdel] Nasser, he had been born poor and, like Nasser, he had grown to high rank in the army.

He had been Marshall's personal assistant in the State Department, eventually becoming under secretary for Near East and African affairs. He was a natural choice. And yet I was useful because I always had Nasser's ear.

Such things happened because of friendships. The elegant gentleman in Brazil who adopted me, not legally but unofficially, was considered the "Churchill of Brazil", Oswaldo [Osvaldo] Aranha. In his biography he names "two sons, two daughters, and an American daughter". I had met him in 1948, but with his final friendship and "family connection" and his backing, I had an instant contact with President [Getulio] Vargas of Brazil.

I was already very close to the Greek royal family through George Marshall's introduction. I also got to know the country's head, General [Alexander] Papagos, so here again I was useful on Cyprus, commuting between New York, Washington, Cyprus and London. For a year and a half I played that job along with my editing work at *Look*.

M: We've touched on two elements of your life; publishing and your work for two presidents. There is a third element that you mentioned before, it is not to be ignored. You are a painter. Is this something you've done all your life?

C: No, and I'm pleased you asked me, because I am particularly proud of having become a painter after I married and went to live in London. How it happened is an endearing, wonderful story.

In London, which I've a1ways felt is the real crossroads of the world--*everybody* comes through--I entertain on Wednesdays - all sorts of guests. Good talk makes it a remarkable sort of Roman forum. This salon-entertaining became known; eventually art

gallery owners asked if I would include a painter who was about to have an exhibition the following week. Often it was an unknown painter. I would, gladly, - *if* I liked the work. If I liked it I always bought something to show at home and then invited my guests to meet the painter.

One Wednesday I invited the Venetian painter, Dominic [Domenico] Gnoli. His Italian family were then compared to the Sitwells of England: they wrote, they composed, were important intellectuals and the son had an astonishing talent which I loved. Though only twenty-two, he seemed to have walked out of a very old and very, very beautiful Middle Age painting: long eyelashes, beautiful black hair, charming gentleman.

My husband and I knew he'd never been in England before; he'd probably like a weekend with us in the country. He agreed enthusiastically. He was only there a half hour when he asked if I'd mind if he painted: "I have to paint. I paint every day."

"Of course, I'll give you privacy. Nothing would give me more pleasure than to have you work here." I gave him a separate room. I watched him and realized how much I'd also love to do the same.

Why had I not painted before? I'd always wanted to paint, but as an editor I was so very critical. My office was always piled up with paintings being submitted for publication. "Get that one out of here; that's awful. That one is great; we'll keep that for publication. Good. Bad." So how could *I* paint? How could I possibly live up to my own critical eye?

Watching that young man paint, I couldn't resist the longing. "Would you lend

me some paints and whatever else I need?"

"Look," he replied, "I'll do so if you meet my conditions." He was a young man, just over twenty. Although I thought this an unpleasant remark, I asked what were those conditions.

"First of all, never copy me - you must sit on the opposite side of the room."

"Well, I've never been known to copy anybody in any way, ever, in my life", I practically snorted.

"Okay. But you mustn't paint anything banal."

"Thank you a lot. That's very kind of you."

"What would I like to paint?", he asked.

I went to the kitchen for the bit of straw backing for the brie cheese we had for lunch; I love detail. I put it on the table in front of me, added a rose, a walnut and an apple to arrange a modest still life like the Dutch painted.

He crossed the room and threw it all aside, "Give me back my paints. I'm not rude," he said, "I'm being helpful. This is certainly not what you should paint."

Trying hard not to snarl, I demanded, "If you know so much, what do you think I should paint?"

He looked at me with a warm smile and said, "Look, you are the woman who created *Flair*. Anybody who could do that must have imagination and memories. *Paint those*."

Happily, I sat down and painted my first painting. When the gallery owner came to pick Gnoli up on Sunday, he looked at it and said, "You're good. Keep painting. I will

give you a show." That's how I began.

M: What was that painting?

C: It was the sort of composition I still paint today - called magic realism. Everything is exact but out of context, and entirely from memory. I painted a pinkish sky, a clump of earth floating in air, roots hanging down - with a great bunch of pink cyclamen growing in the sky, painted from memory.

I've never copied anything since. If you offered me any amount to paint a particular subject, even a bouquet of flowers, I would decline because I can't bear to copy. But something in the particular bouquet might be so extraordinary that I would never forget it and perhaps it might appear in some future painting.

[Tape 1 of *2,* Side 2]

M: You were about to tell me about many shows you've had.

C: I left England a little less than a week ago, where I had just had my fiftieth one-man show after exhibiting in most countries in the world--recently in three very exciting shows in Tokyo, Kyoto and Kanisawa in Japan.

I am glad to talk about the last one in London because it was an extraordinary experience. Gallery business in London has been very poor; paintings haven't been selling. Four important galleries lost owners who have committed suicide having done so little business and owing much to banks. It wasn't a propitious time to have an exhibition. However, my friends in England hadn't seen my work for a few years so it was time. The gallery was beautiful and big. I could at least show friends how I was painting.

I decided to keep opening night a private one - just for friends. We never give cocktail parties (and never go to them) but this was a chance to give a large one and show my work.

Hundreds came, many of them royal and many government members - so crowded one could barely see a painting. Yet, thirty-five sold the first night. The exhibition came to an end two weeks later with every painting sold, gallery history in this depressed gallery year.

There are also special anecdotes. The window was being trimmed the night before as a man and his wife walked by and said, "I like those pictures," and went in and bought them. The proprietor said, "Tomorrow is our opening, just for the painter's friends but I'm sure she would consider you collector-friends now - do come as well." They came and bought seven more. I explained to them how flattered I was by their enthusiasm and asked why they bought as many as *nine* paintings.

"We buy everything you do. We are your greatest fans. We have all your books. We have everything, all the porcelain you've done for Limoges as well as all the bone china animals and flower you create. Everything you design. We love your work, of course, or we wouldn't have it. But we know you were a great friend of President Eisenhower's and he has always been my idol," the husband explained.

"We've just bought Eisenhower's London house, around the corner from the gallery - we are going to make it a 'Fleur house'.

Another thing happened the same night. Another fascinating woman also bought seven paintings. Alfred Rockefeller of New York, passing by, bought a large painting of

a tiger, took it off the walls and carried it to New York by air the next day, giving many of my friends an account of the exhibition's success. I was proud.

I might also tell you of my experience with Crown Prince Hiro of Japan. I never thought I'd exhibit in Japan. I never have an exhibition anywhere unless by invitation: (a) I haven't got time to solicit and (b) my pride gets in the way.

The Japan exhibitions were the result of an unexpected friendship. I was a member of a sort of mini-Nobel Prize committee conducted with enormous generosity and great expense by the Rolex Company in Geneva. One of the other members of the small board was the famed Japanese architect, Kisho Kurokawa, a shy but important and extraordinary human being. I wanted to celebrate our growing friendship, so we gave a dinner in London in his honor. When he saw my paintings there (getting ready to ship to a coming exhibition in the USA) he asked who did them. I explained they were mine.

"They've got to be seen in Japan", he announced.

He arranged three exhibitions; he also created a reception committee, not just at the airport but ever after for three weeks. They were with us continually: the Emperor's daughter, every owner of every important brand-name company in Japan; they gave a dinner for us daily, no matter where we were. We returned the hospitality at luncheons.

The Crown Prince, having one painting, invited us to have tea with him in the Imperial Palace. Though very shy, he took hold of my wrist to announce to me: "You're not American." I insisted I was. "No, no - you are not American."

"Sir, you'll never know anyone more American. I carry an American passport although I've lived in England for thirty-eight years because I am still an American."

"You couldn't be," he insisted. "You couldn't paint like this unless you *were* Japanese. You are hanging in this Imperial Palace, and we don't hang foreign work here."

M: How very nice.

C: Those shows were a great success in the three cities. All the critics wrote or commented on the air that I must be inspired by Japanese art. Whenever they said so I simply replied: "How flattering."

M: I'm going to move soon to a discussion of your book, because I know it is going to dwell heavily on interesting people. But before getting into that, I want to ask you about your connections with the Johnson family, because that is going to be important for our archive. First of all, did you ever know President Johnson?

C: Very well. Very well, although we met long, long ago in a casual way. My former husband and I used to give the party after each of the National Press Gridiron dinners in Washington. We always invited the press plus *their* important guests so I met the Johnsons at one such evening in 1948. Somehow, the wonderful, marvelous luck that has played a part in my life worked again - instant friendship occurred. From then on I've seen the family regularly, originally by chance, but later by design. Later I went to the Ranch every year and attended important affairs in the White House and out and entertained any Johnson who happened to be in London. We are deeply, deeply devoted to Lady Bird as I was to the President. Lady Bird is *my* icon. If I could attain any element of her greatness I would be very proud.

M: You are close to her daughters, too, aren't you?

C: I love them and of course I see them. They come to England and I help see to it that they see or do the right things there, or give parties for them, and we correspond.

M: President Johnson's nephew, Philip Bobbitt - I take it you knew him in London earlier.

C: Oh yes! About six years ago Lady Bird said, "I have a nephew in London" and suggested I "look after him." That's how that friendship began.

M: Your book is going to have the title, as I recall -

C: *She Made Friends and Kept Them.* An amazing anecdote is responsible for it. To be discreet, I can't tell you the name of the reporter involved - a certain lady reporter who once worked in this beautiful state of yours. I was being interviewed by her about two years ago. She was incredibly unkind but I knew what she was up to: she tried to provoke equally nasty retorts to pepper up her column. I simply became nicer, nicer, nicer, not nastier and she never got the sort of quotes she was after.

Finally, in anger, she grabbed me by the wrist: "Okay, okay, so you've done everything. *Who cares*?"

"I care, I care very much", I replied, "but I don't really mind if you don't."

"Okay, okay. But *you are dead now*. You are not going to be cremated, you are going to be buried. What do you want on your tombstone?" An extra snarl.

I was not prepared but words fell out of my mouth. Certainly I hadn't come with an answer to such an incredible question - but I grabbed *her* by the wrists to say: "I'll never be able to thank you enough. You've just revealed *me*, to *me*. You made me realize what counts most in my life. On my tombstone I want: '*She Made Friends and Kept Them*.'"

When I got home to London, I realized what I'd said. Publishers have asked me for a traditional autobiography but it is one which I will never, never write. My childhood, my parents, my wonderful dead sister, all the sad things, are no one's business. Nor is my marriage to Mike Cowles, although I'll say anything you want about thirty-nine years non-stop marriage to my present husband who is unique and wonderful. I'm just not interested in writing a cradle-to-grave autobiography.

Instead, after the Texas interview, I realized that the answer was my book, one about my friends! My book, which will be out in six or nine months, is called *She Made Friends - and Kept Them.* One of the most important chapters in it is about Lady Bird.

M: There is no reason to ask you who is the first among equals in that group, but as you look back, who, aside from Tom Meyer, has had the most influence on your life?

C: The man who had the greatest influence on my life, and though he is dead he's still there "talking to me" and pushing me on, was Bernard Baruch. He was one of three men who adopted me, in principle if not legally. In his own biography, Baruch says he had two sons, two daughters and Fleur Cowles. It is a part of his diary record.

I met him when I was young. He was delighted by my curiosity - about whatever was going on in the world. He decided that I had brains and that he was there to help me develop them. In effect, he became my thought-and-idea-processor. He taught me to have serious care about *facts*, and he had a far-reaching technique in doing so.

He'd call me up every morning at eight-thirty. Because he was so deaf, and hated to use his earphone, he would shout at me over the phone, half-scaring me to death to ask me the important question of that day: Wall Street? The bomb? Did I believe in

abortion? Estes Kefauver - was he right or should he be thrust out? To Mr. Baruch, there was one thing that counted most every day - and I had to have the answer.

I did try to have the answer: I read and read. I got up at six to read the newspapers. I never let anybody say anything wise without asking for it to be repeated. Baruch might ask me about it the next day. Over the years he taught me to worship *facts*. I still do.

He wanted so much for me to go into politics. He adored and loved, really loved, Clare Luce, and did help her move into that world. But I wouldn't accept the idea because I wasn't willing to stand up--to lie, if need be--to be elected. I wasn't interested in asking for votes. But Baruch was thrilled to death when Ike took me on, absolutely thrilled.

He then decided I should be a diplomat. I'm probably one of the few people alive to turn down an ambassadorship. I was offered one in Europe, but I declined because I wouldn't dream of putting a husband in such a difficult position. In the end, I didn't have to because I had the President's ear and was able to do things for him anyway. Baruch was thrilled. "At least," he said, "Ike also knows you're good."

M: Do you have a political philosophy that aligns you with either of the major parties in the United States?

C: No, I've never been a party member. I'm an independent. I vote for the *man*.

And listen, talking about men: although I was married to the Republican of his time, a man who financed Wendell Willkie, my hero was Harry Truman. For me, he was a great American: a great President, always on the right side of a moral issues--except

for Hiroshima. Mike Cowles understood that. In fact, I did one thing which for a long time preyed on my mind; I was actually filled with guilt although I had been right to do it.

Helen Reid, owner of the *New York Herald Tribune,* once presided over our annual newspaper forum, to which heads of state and men and women of importance were invited for a week of speech-making on important issues of the day. Just before an election she asked me to debate with Dorothy Schiff, owner of the *New York Post*, on the fitness of Eisenhower versus [Adlai] Stevenson for the presidency. Although Stevenson was a close friend of Mike's, and no Cowles would vote for a Democrat, I did ask if it would offend him if I spoke for Eisenhower against his friend.

"Not at all - if you do it the right way. What *are* you going to do?" I told him my strategy. And went ahead.

Candidate Eisenhower sat behind me on the dais on the fateful election eve. My opening gambit was to admit that I knew Stevenson and admired him as much as so much of the world admired him, that he was gallant, brave, idealistic - but that he found it hard to accomplish his aims and ideals.

I simply took his record as Governor of Illinois and tore it apart: Race relations? The worst in America. Corruption? The worst of any state. I went down the list - taking little time, and sat down. I won the debate.

M: Were you a supporter of LBJ when he was in the White House?

C: Oh, yes.

M: How did you feel about Vietnam?

C: Terrible. Disgraceful. I was against it. But I never blamed LBJ as many others may do because I understood the progression of America's involvement in Vietnam. I knew that Eisenhower had refused to send troops, sending the military "to observe and advise". And slowly, through Kennedy, troops began to take their terribly active role. LBJ inherited this policy. He took lots of advice, including Kissinger's in accelerating the numbers.

No, I never held him totally responsible, but I hated it, thought we were doing the wrong thing. I could never forget that Truman wouldn't have done it as an American activity. He made it the action of the UN in sending troops to Korea. By the way, I went to the front lines in Korea.

M: How did you go to the front lines in Korea?

C: When in the White House, seeing the President one day I remarked how awful it must be in Korea, that I'd love to see it for myself. Not as a reporter, just to see that hellhole. He gave the okay, as an observer, to attend the Panmunjom truce conference.

I arrived wearing five layers of battle dress, living in Seoul with the officer corps, who hardly knew I was a woman, buried in all those clothes for the icy cold. Once in the front lines with Frank Pace, Secretary of the Army, I don't even think he knew I was female. In about a week I certainly learned about warfare; I have written about it in my book.

I also have a chapter in my book on peril, and how that word fits into friendship, how I have gone to intriguing places often ending up in peril. Even friends, thinking they were doing me a good turn, were involved in close brushes with death on occasion.

M: Do you see anybody on the horizon now, in either party, that interests you as presidential material?

C: I must tell you that five or six years ago I thought it would be Chuck Robb, a potential hero. It was heartbreaking to see him fall from grace. I used to watch him as a young man with guts, courage and the right ideas. Something went wrong, but I'm happy that he licked the terrible Ollie North and is making his deserved comeback in the Senate.

M: I want to return to the subject of Vietnam briefly, not to dwell on it, but to ask if you ever registered your protest about the Vietnam War in any way?

C: Yes. I'll tell you how. Living in England, I felt I had a function there during the Vietnam War--and I still have--as the American who speaks the truth. When English friends ask me what goes on in America, I certainly set them right if they have the wrong view. And when they criticized our policy in Vietnam I told them they were right. They now trust me.

M: Perhaps you recorded this in your book, but in the event that you don't, tell me how Tom Meyer came into your life.

C: It is a delicious story, typical of Tom. I was on one of my friendly visits to the Shah in Teheran: exhausted by the program that had been arranged and due to take a plane back from Teheran to the USA. The plane was supposed to leave about five o'clock in the afternoon, but the Shah actually kept that plane waiting by dictating that it must not leave until I was on it. I was late, sadly, and walked onto a plane with a sea of angry, very angry people.

Only one seat was available - on the aisle, which I hate as I prefer the window.

And on the aisle seat opposite was an unknown gentleman. I was exhausted after having been arrested by mistake in the Lebanon on the way over to Teheran, missing my plane, arriving a day late. I had to return to London, without rest, too soon. I took my seat, picked two empty dirty Coca-Cola bottles out of the seat pocket facing me. The man opposite asked if he could take them. I thanked him, pulled out of my bag a big black chiffon scarf, tied it around my eyes, lowered my chair, and went to sleep.

Those were the days when no plane ever flew anywhere directly; instead stopping everywhere. One of our stops was Athens. This man on my right in the aisle seat asked the elderly man on his right in the window seat if he wasn't getting off. No, he wasn't.

"Aren't you going around the world? You're skipping Greece?" He was practically commanded off the plane. Turning to me, he then asked if I would like the window seat.

I said, "I'd love it" and jumped at the opportunity to change seats. I was still very cool, because I tended to be cool to strangers. He didn't know who I was. I didn't know who he was. No one knew the identity of this terribly late lady. He suddenly asked me if I'd ever heard of a man called Walter Reuther? Yes, I did.

"You actually know Walter Reuther?" It turned out that this man, who I eventually married, had little of more importance on his mind than the question of proper labor relations. His family's timber business owned and operated sixteen docks around England's coast. In those days no man ever worked at any job which was less fulfilling than a docker's. In those days my companion anguished over the difficulty of their lives and did what he could to make them better. In fact, he is the first employer to pay a

docker for days he *didn't* work. They used to be paid only by the piece if and when they did work. They often lacked enough money to buy food, even at Christmas. The timber executive was so thrilled that I knew and appreciated Walter Reuther's insistence on better working conditions for laborers that, unsuspectedly [unexpectedly?], he fell in love.

We got to Rome where we de-planed to have breakfast. I wanted to send a wire but he asked if he could send it for me; it was to remind Claridges Hotel to have a car at the airport for me - hence, he knew where I was staying. He waited a day before he called me to come and have a drink at home with him. "I wouldn't think of it," I announced. I had only just met him on a plane; I was a prude--still am. He roared with laughter.

"What are you laughing at?"

"I knew you'd say that," he replied.

I then decided: "I'll be right over." Two years later we were married.

Soon after that trip I found out--the whole world seemed to know it but I didn't--that Mike Cowles had a mistress. "You can have her, I'm leaving." I did leave America. And eventually, seeing a lot of Tom Meyer, I married him.

M: How have you found life in London?

C: For me, it is instant heaven because I soon fell out of the unwanted goldfish bowl. After our California marriage, my arrival in England was a press event. I was very famous in those days. Hundreds of photographers were at the airport to greet us but I soon closed the doors on the press and found I could become private. In England you can live,

whatever life you wish - and that's not easy in America. In London I do have privacy, yet I live a public life. I often try to imagine that in the United States. I didn't know it in advance, but it is what I have created. I don't do anything I don't want to do. I don't have to be seen at every opening. In America, when I'd enter the restaurant where I regularly ate I knew women were asking "*What* has she got? How did she *get* there?" - jealousy rampant which I don't find anywhere in England. Never.

Incidentally, I want to talk about the *Flair* book, may I?

M: Before we do that, let me ask you one thing. Aside from lady Bird Johnson, who is the most important woman that you've known?

C: No question: my proudest friend in England is the Queen Mother, who I do worship. To be her warm friend is such an accolade from the lady I hold in the greatest possible esteem. I've known her forty years. I know why she is the one woman I admire most, other than Lady Bird.

Tape 2 of 2, Side 1

H: We are talking about your relationship with the Queen Mother. How in the world did you meet her and get to be on friendly terms with her; you, an American?

C: When Lew [Lewis W.] Douglas was American ambassador to Britain, he arranged for King George and his wife, Queen Elizabeth, to come to America for a state visit. When they were in New York he gave a dinner party to which there were only a dozen other guests; Mike Cowles and I were two of those twelve. I had the great good fortune to make an instant friend that night.

I didn't know that I'd ever come to live in England, but when I did one of the first

luncheons I went to was given by the London *Times* newspaper owner, Thomson's son, Lord Kenneth Thomson, who invited us to his little luncheon for eight in the Queen Mother's honor. We clasped hands, remembering our meeting. And friendship, grand and lasting on a regular scale began.

On her birthday, we now give her a party every year. We see her at Clarence House regularly. I have countless handwritten letters from her. We are close enough for her to know I love her. I could write a book, but of course I never will. I know why England loves her, and I know why anybody who meets her loves her too.

Unlike many others in the royal family, she is very merry, she is affectionate - and she's got one habit which I worship in all people: her curiosity, which seems to drive her: *she must know*. Imagine what that means to me - a woman who must also *know*? We tell each other what each knows.

Among all royals, she's the most eclectic. Her house is a personal museum which reflects her tastes. Nothing to do with the fashion, but you will find a fascinating collection on the walls. She collects--like a squirrel--buying, bringing them home to roost. She's full of humor and she cares.

I made a vow thirty-five years ago: never to ask the same people to meet her at home. Each time, I send a brief biography of guests who will be coming. This she apparently studies to the delight of any person I'm able to give a few minutes with her after dinner. She starts talking to them with a personal comment about the book, the brave deed, their background. "Whatever made you do it?" is the way she may start a conversation. Or, "you've just composed another sonata; why don't we hear it?" She

thrills everybody because she cares enough to make them like her.

I'm sad about her, very sad, because she suddenly, overnight, has become frail. We celebrated her ninety-fourth birthday this year.

M: Does she ever talk to you about the peccadilloes of her family?

C: Yes, but I would never discuss that.

M: Of course.

C: I've kept my friends because they all trust me. I know much about the Greek royal family; I know much about the royals but I would never discuss or write a confidence. They know this. She must, of course, be unhappy, especially because she loves Prince Charles. One can imagine her concern.

M: Do you know Prince Charles?

C: Yes.

M: And do you know his wife?

C: Yes, but I don't know Prince Charles's mistress, and don't expect to.

M: We keep reading that there appears to be a stronger cry than has been heard before for an abolition of the royalty. Is that something that is really happening?

C: What happened is obvious. Diana was apparently treated badly enough that she took her revenge by collaborating on the book about her life. The book's publication immediately opened the door to the press. They found themselves able to discuss and report on the book's printed evidence of royal behavior. Never before had that door opened even an inch. It is now open a yard, with little or nothing left unsaid today. Nothing. Little by little by little, most members of the royal family--other than the Queen, Princesses Anne

and Alexandra--have been given the "treatment".

M: Are you close enough to the situation in this country to have an observation about the new liberties that the press takes with elected officials?

C: Well, yes, only don't limit it to "this country," meaning England. It is the press in general, *everywhere*. But I can tell you a very strange thing on which both my husband and I agree completely. In England today there is no respect for the crown, the government, the church, the law, the press, perhaps because it has gone too far. The press in fact seems to run the government. I'd hate to be in government, because the press is going to "expose" you, whoever you are, whether deserved or not.

M: Suppose you were still in publishing; how would you treat this new freedom that the press seems to have?

C: I can tell you, without hesitation, that it is a good thing I'm not, because it was always understood at *Look* and by all our newspaper editors that I was a pretty poor editor when it came to scandal and crime. I never want to publish it, ever. "Don't tell Fleur; she won't run it," was the edict.

I do not approve of chasing away good men who might have wished to stand for government. Who among them wants to become a member of the government to survive what the press puts them through? In England, all the good people that we know and admire roar with laughter if we ask why they aren't in government. Isn't that also true in the USA?

Tom Meyer: Everything you say is true.

C: Thank you.

H: Tell me about the *Flair* book.

C: I said with some emotion at the beginning that I always thought *Flair* should be my obit. About two years ago I decided that it was really so sad that only those who knew the original *Flair*, know *Flair*, that I must do something new about it. I bound a sample book - elegantly, expensively and in a box. I mean bound as if entirely finished contents I chose from all the original *Flair* magazines, a book to be called *The Best of Flair.*

I went through every page in *Flair*'s magazine and the *Annual* selecting what I thought was the best - applying a rigid formula: *would it run today*? I thought that somewhere, someone would be willing to publish it. Harper Collins enthusiastically bought it and it will be published sometime in 1996.

It may be amazing but I am able to tell you that nothing will appear in that book that I could not honestly consider topical today - forty-five years later! Cocteau wrote "A Letter to America", which was the first book I bound in the first issue of *Flair* in February 1950. Cocteau could have written it today. I published Tennessee Williams's first article. I can't begin to name the others. Those who were great then, wrote something so good it might even be written now. They are in the new book.

The art: I brought England's greatest living painter, Lucian Freud, in print in that same year in America. I discovered many other painters. I didn't have any fun in going for those already famous; I wanted to bring fame to the unknown. And those people, if they wrote something or painted or commented in those early issues, which remains of topical interest, are to be reprinted now.

M: You have two books on their way to publication. You have lust launched a series of

conferences and symposia at the University of Texas. You and your husband are helping to beam medical advice to nineteen countries in the third world by satellite (called SatelLife). You and your husband have started a Center for American studies at Oxford. And you have finished your fiftieth exhibition. What next for Fleur Cowles?

C: We have those two things in our lives at the moment that have to somehow be finished - one is building that new institute at Oxford called the Institute for American Studies. We will not just put up a building; we hope to continue with its later life. I wouldn't have agreed to get involved unless it was absolutely obvious that we should see American culture as well as history and political literature there.

As for other things, there is the business of the SatelLifes; they have to grow. Some years ago, at our luncheon table in London, our group worried about Third World medical students. They are trained in medicine in the United States or Europe and seem to work harder, longer, and usually to graduate at high levels. Then what happens? They go back to the jungle. They don't have peers to talk to, they don't have books to read, they rarely get news, they often don't even have a phone link ten miles away. They are lost. We now have two satellites which are circling the globe to give them free medical advice. This work will go on for the rest of our lives.

More about my future life? When I have time from painting and writing--and by the way, I've still three more books that are already committed--it will still be in education. But the happiest thing that ever happened to me may be my work here at Texas University [the University of Texas], which came into my life two years ago. I love the university and I love Texas, not just the Johnsons. I'm happy every time I'm

here.

[End of Tape 2 of 2 and Interview I]

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FLEUR COWLES

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This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

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(2) The edited tape recording shall not be available to ~~those researchers who have access to the transcript.~~ anyone.

(3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the attached edited interview transcript and resulting edited tape.

(4) The original (and all copies of the original) tape recording and transcript shall be destroyed by the Archivist of the United States forthwith.

Fleur Cowles
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