

Chicago Tribune Magazine

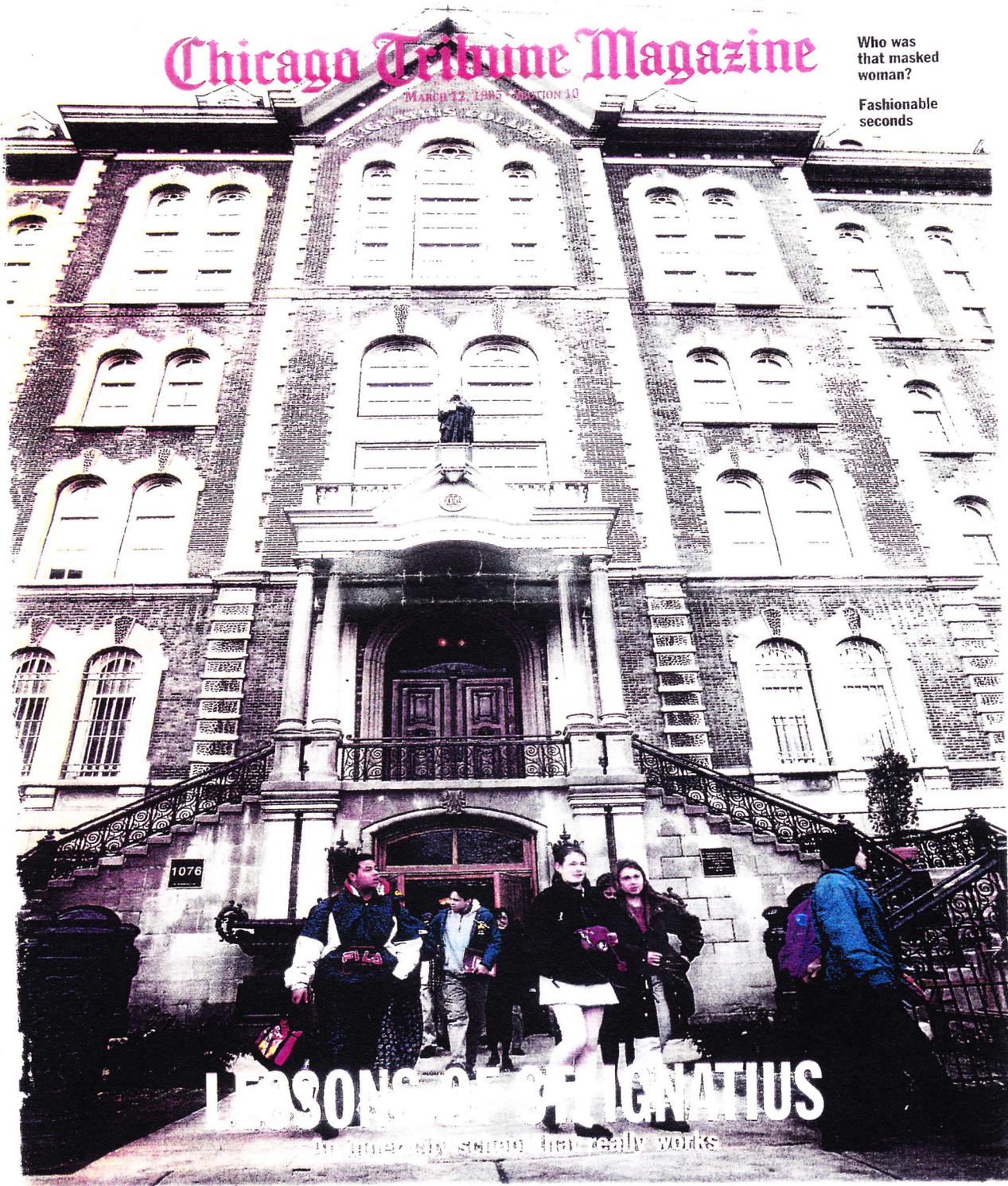
MARCH 12, 1995 \$3.00 (CIRCULATION 10)

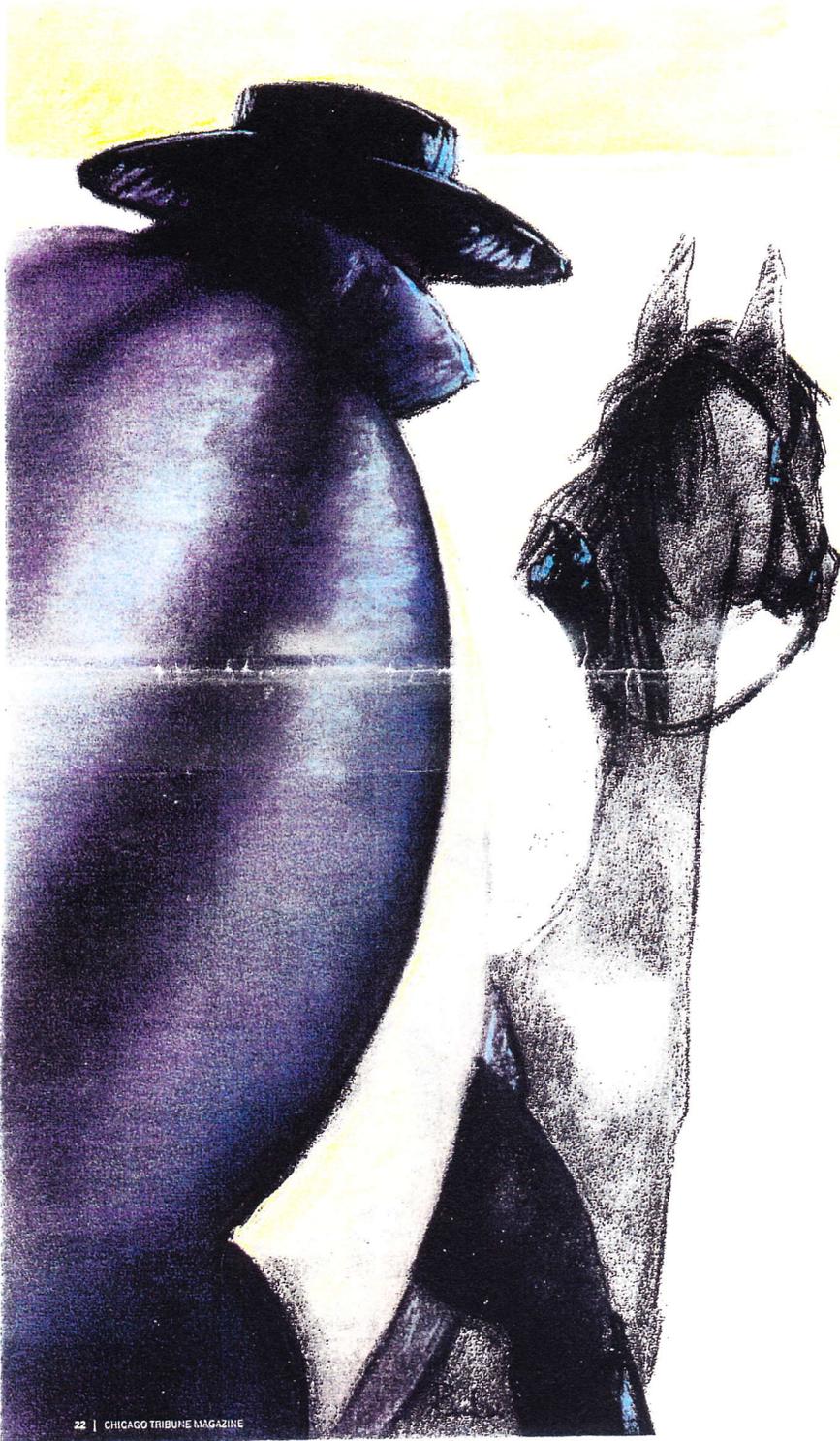
Who was that masked woman?

Fashionable seconds

LEASONS OF ST. IGNATIUS

An inner-city school that really works





Who was that masked woman?

*Behind her
traditional, feminine
front lies a more
daring, secret self*

Essay by Marya Smith

It's a habit: as ingrained as drinking coffee. In fact, it fits snugly in my memory bank with images of warm coffee mugs. Did it start in college, or on my early jobs, or when I was a young mother anxiously trying to fit into the coffee klatch culture? I don't know for sure, only that as far back as I can remember, whenever I have had a coffee mug at hand, I have traced the letter Z onto the mug with my finger, beginning where the top of the curved handle meets the mug and making the final slash further down where the handle merges with the body of the mug.

It is always an absent-minded gesture, often repetitive, and usually slow, but sometimes quickened from nerves. I never really gave it much thought. I knew what the Z stood for. It wasn't anything deep. The Z was for Zorro. I knew that because occasionally I would trace the rest of the letters, o-r-r-o onto the

Marya Smith is a freelance writer who last wrote about parents and the "college tour."

ILLUSTRATION BY PAULA PERTILE

mug as well, always in cursive. I've just always done it. Whenever I've had a mug of coffee before me, I have lazily, dreamily, or nervously traced the letter Z in the space between the two handle points.

But one morning recently it struck me as funny that a 49 year old woman has traced the letter Z, or the name Zorro, on her coffee mug for at least two and a half decades, probably longer. My amusement turned to musing, and for the first time I wondered, why Z? Why does Zorro rise up from my subconscious unbidden, time after time after time?

I decided that I have a Zorro complex, and at first this pleased me. It sounds so much healthier than a Cinderella or a Sleeping Beauty complex. More exciting. And adventurous. But the more I think about my affinity to Zorro, the more I wonder.

It's old news that a person's favorite fairy tale reveals her innermost conflicts and aspirations. I read far more fairy tales growing up than I watched television shows, and yet it is the stylized black and white television series story of Zorro that fed my psyche. When I step back from the blurred screen memory complete with commercial breaks, I can see that the story of Zorro is a kind of fairy tale: the hero accomplishes great

deeds, but only as long as he masks his true identity. After each daring success, just before he rides off, the bold figure on horseback slashes the shape of a Z onto the earth with his sword. And daily, I trace an invisible Z on my coffee mug, an absent-minded reflex, drawing from a childhood memory, perhaps some early version of myself.

But why Zorro? There is the obvious appeal of a hero on horseback, (a dramatic chiaroscuro hero at that, since I never saw the technicolor movie version). The horse must be the appeal, I first thought. I love horses, always have, and even started riding again in my early forties. But then why not a Roy Rogers or a Dale Evans complex?

I think about Zorro some more, conjuring up some of the old shows, not the plots, which long ago escaped me, but my strong emotional response to the daily pattern of Diego/Zorro's life. Mild-mannered Don Diego is, of course, the daring Zorro. But he can't reveal his identity or he will harm the very people he seeks to help. He can only do the right thing by wearing the mask, the costume. He can only be Zorro secretly. I understood this of course, but not as a plot conceit. I understood this with my whole heart. Each day I was saddened all over again

that no one but Diego knew his true, bolder self, but each day I understood Diego's bravery, his strength in hiding his stronger identity.

But oh, the longing I felt, and still feel, for Diego to stride forth onto his father's veranda in full Zorro regalia—but without the mask. How he would dazzle them. How they would finally respect him, admire him. But, of course, he cannot. It is this tension in Diego's life that makes him a kindred spirit.

Diego is compliant, charmingly inoffensive, a dandy by day. Effeminate, really. Why, yes, now that I'm an adult I can see that. Diego was the effeminate front to a daring, brave, heroic secret self. The secret part is the key. Much as I pined for Diego to reveal his braver identity, I sighed with resignation, knowing his heroic deeds would suffer if anyone saw his true self. So it had to be: no one could ever know that mild-mannered Diego was really the dashing Zorro, protector of the weak, challenger to the injustices of the world.

I, too, have been compliant and feminine by day. By year. By decade. I have maintained a traditional feminine front to sustain a more daring secret self. By

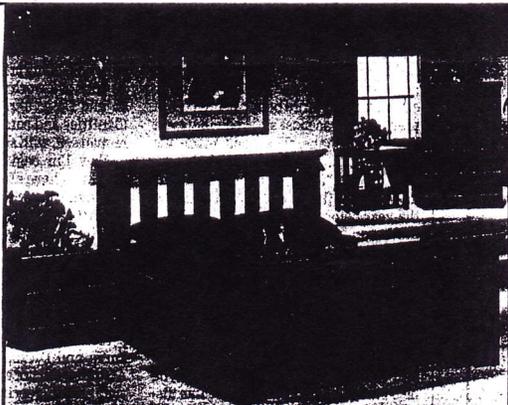
day I smile and do the bidding of those who depend on me. By night I write about my own feelings and thoughts and discover what I believe is true and vital. Who would ever believe that mild-mannered Marya Smith, mother and feature writer, was really Zorro, protector of an inner life quite at odds with the ideas and standards of the world?

Don't I long to stride onto any veranda, any room, and speak my mind, say the very things I write so privately at night? Ah, then they would have to respect me. Then they would have to listen to me in a new way. The way they listen to those who are allowed to be outspoken, bold, opinionated, complex and whole.

Yet the idea sends a shiver down my spine. I'm a Diego—feminine, ineffectual, safe. If I speak up, raise my voice, exhibit confidence, I become a shrew, a bitch, a hag. No one is fond of a shrew. Everyone is fond of Diego. Who would ever choose respect over fondness?

Maybe only someone who is finally worn out from leading a double life, someone who can no longer remember the reason for it. Someone like that could pull on the black cape over the prissy Diego tights, throw off the black mask, and swing herself up on the prancing horse, in full daylight, maybe

experience
the warm,
soothing
comfort
only
flotation
sleep can
offer.



we've got the LOOK

THE LOOK THAT WILL LAST FOR GENERATIONS.

quality bedroom furnishings from
traditional cherry wood to contemporary oak.
luxurious BEAUTYREST waterbeds.
elegant linen designs.

see "the look" and style of today's
flotation sleep available only at



dial 312 PEPPERS

for a FREE VIDEO "the benefits of a waterbed"
ask about NO PAYMENTS TILL NEXT YEAR

ONLY A WATERBED CAN SUPPORT YOUR LOWER BACK.

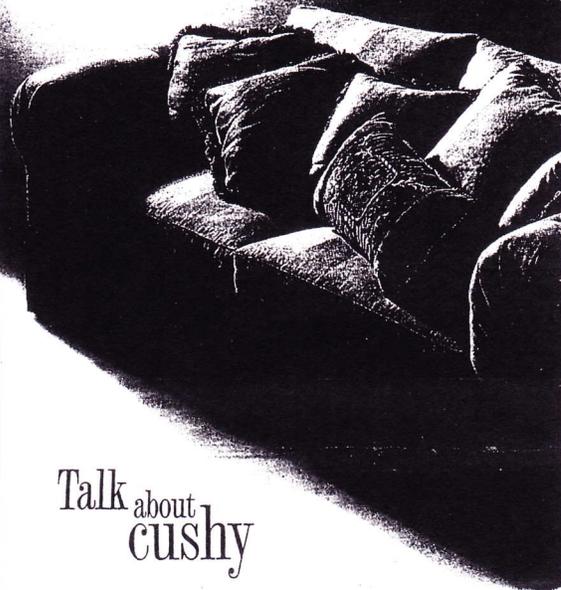
While laying on a standard mattress, there is a gap between the bed and your lower back. This lack of support causes backaches. A Peppers Waterbed

gives you complete, even support. Plus, the warmth from a Peppers Waterbed aids circulation and helps you fall asleep faster.



Complete, even support

No interest
for 12 months



Talk about
cushy

Finally! A furniture offer with legs! Right now, when you use your Expressions credit card, there will be no finance charges for the first 12 months. That's a year of credit -- free! 700 designerfabrics. 150 frame styles. Delivery in 45 days. Come find yourself in our furniture. And find a little extra cash in your pocket.



EXPRESSIONS
CUSTOM FURNITURE

Chicago • 435 N. LaSalle • (312) 744-1480
Deerfield • 405 Lake Cook Rd. • (708) 498-0096

©1995 Expressions in Fabric, Ltd. • For a limited time only • Minimum monthly payment required.
Hours: Mon-Fri 10:30-6; Sat. 10:30-5; Sun. 12-5
Items may or may not have been sold at suggested retail in this market.



Expressions
Credit Card
now available

even in full color. And take the consequences.

For a moment I picture myself galloping onto the verandas of my life. To heck with striding. I feel great, brave, until I picture family members pulling back in confusion, editors turning away in frustration. Where is the agreeable Diego they knew and trusted? And sometimes indulged. Who wants to deal with this virago? Zorro's are okay by night, but that black cape is really unattractive at a 10 a.m. meeting or at dinnertime.

How can I predict these reactions? Perhaps because I have slipped on the cape from time to time in broad daylight. The first was probably the year I turned the family guest room, a haven for countless demanding relatives, into my office, replacing the heirloom sleigh bed with my computer and desk. My reorganization was the talk of both families, although the talk gradually subsided into an uneasy acceptance of this newly-discovered character defect, this hidden selfishness.

They got another glimpse of Zorro when I stopped pretending I liked to cook. This was a gradual admission, preceded by months of unaccountably over- or underdone dishes, the more frequent purchase of frozen dinners and last-minute pizzas, and other subterfuges that even I did not choose to acknowledge as rebellion against wasted hours in the kitchen. Finally the day came when I overheard my daughter explain to a friend, "My Mom doesn't cook; she heats," and when I heard myself laughing, not crying, I knew I was swaggering in the cape.

Another break from Diego's bobbing smile was my second children's novel, when I wrote about an emotional place I had been carefully taught to pretend did not exist. True, I used fiction to give the emotions a separate body and place, but their shape was most assuredly my most innermost shape. The book made me more visible. Relatives solved this by referring to "Marya's book," singular, meaning my first, safer book, published the year before. They thereby rendered the second one, though published to equally good reviews, as invisible as Zorro in the daylight.

But these breakouts of the dangerous sequestered self are the exception. The unassuming Diego is the rule. So the question inevitably surfaces: After years of striving to please, is Zorro even possible? Hey, is he even still there? Maybe he's such a well-kept secret he has dissolved like instant coffee granules, merging into something else.

Perhaps it's time just to give up and let this shadow figure slink off into '50s TV heaven. There's just too much at stake. Think of all the people who would be hurt if they knew I was really Zorro, a person who disagrees as often as she agrees, doesn't always feel like nurturing, and questions aloud as often as she used to smile.

I watched Zorro every weekday after school and I know the rules. I know full well that Diego and Zorro cannot merge into a unified, complex personality — it's

not in the script. The two simple black on white identities are required to remain separate. Diego, with the mask of complacency, must keep Zorro hidden. You just can't reveal Zorro's identity. There would be no show.

Unless, of course, this Zorro figure is a missing part of yourself, the vital part. Unless Zorro is inside, constantly creating tension, trying to get out, making the actor miserable.

Z. Over and over again, when I'm distracted, half conscious, I trace the shape of the Z. As if my finger were the point of my sword. Zorro is reminding me: it's Diego who wears the mask.

And just what is it that I have been so carefully hiding? Not the burden of sexual harassment, not the secret of a lesbian identity, nothing that takes real courage. Only the desire to put myself first as often as I put others first despite the rebuke of selfishness, or to schedule regular time for my own projects and not squeeze them in after other people's schedules have been accommodated. Or even to take outspoken pride in my own accomplishments—not practically erasing them as they appear in fear of diminishing someone else.

So little to hide. And yet it is everything. Everything I am, or at least the missing part. True, I do like to take care of people I care about, but not so automatically and with so little reciprocity. True, I value discussion over confrontation and I find listening as gratifying as disclosure, but not when my own opinions and feelings must routinely be dismissed before they are even spoken.

I no longer understand what I understood so well as a child and for the whole of my adult life: that the structure of a world will collapse if Zorro and Diego simply drop their secret identities and come forward as a single human self, with shadings of gray.

Now I'm beginning to understand that I will have a Zorro complex as long as I deny myself more complexity. If Zorro/Diego can't come out as a complicated—sometimes helpful, sometimes self-involved—person, I will leave that creation to the television screen of my childhood living room.

I realize I have already begun to step outside onto the veranda as one complex person. Something that the original Zorro and Diego, sadly, can never do. Actually, I'm not always doing it all that well either, veering off awkwardly too far in one direction or the other sometimes. But I like it, unskilled as I am.

I am simply fed up with tracing an invisible Z on my coffee mug. I think that my heroic Zorro looks silly and clumsy in his cape and mask, and that my lovable Diego is just as silly and clumsy with his coy secret. Save the horse, but toss this goofy pair of role models. I think I'm finally ready to be less lovable and less heroic, and to simply be who I am, the same by day as by night. If you step outside some afternoon and find an M slashed on your driveway, you won't have to guess who was by. ■