

THE NEW YORKER

Second Acts

Herding Dolls

by Lauren Collins

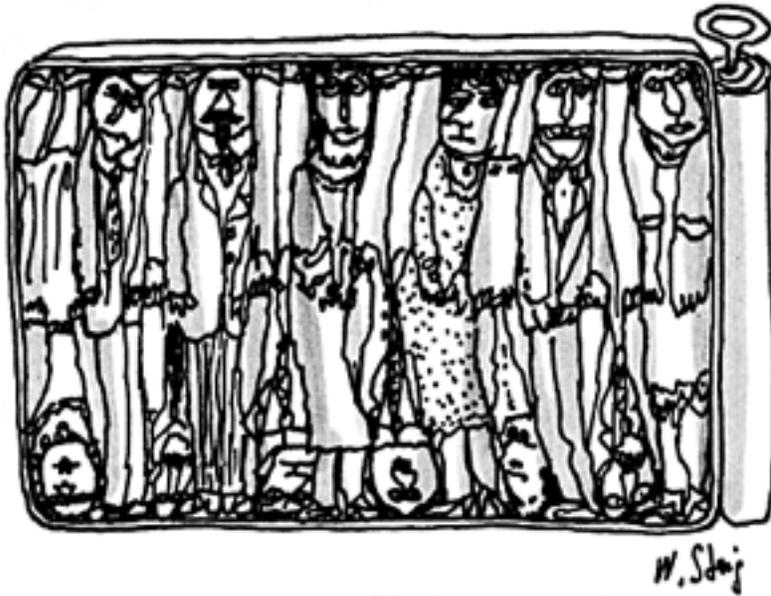
January 5, 2009

Three hundred and eighty-five days after Trent Lott, the minority whip, announced that he would resign from the Senate—“Trish and I have decided that it’s time to do something else,” he said, explaining that his decision to step down had been inspired by Ecclesiastes 3:1—Lott was in New York City, doing something else. Dressed in a navy blazer, gray slacks, and a lavender tie, along with tasseled loafers and a class ring with a Sigma Nu insignia, he had arrived at the 3 West Club, where he was scheduled to speak. “My wife made me follow her around Saks Fifth Avenue. I was exhausted! I did finally find me a chair,” he said, during cocktail hour. “And then we went to the American Girl store,” he continued. “It’s a really sweet thing, because you’ve got the mothers and all the little girls, and then you’ve got some daddies and the little girls. I just backed over in the corner while my wife was placing her order and watched the people. It’s really neat.”

Lott used to live in Pascagoula, Mississippi, and Washington, D.C., but Hurricane Katrina destroyed the Pascagoula house—“my historic beach residence,” as he referred to it in his memoir, “Herding Cats” (the title is a reference to Lott’s skill at corralling votes). Since then, he and his wife have shuttled between the capital and a farmhouse in Jackson that they fixed up with the flood-insurance money. In the memoir, which was published by ReganBooks in 2005, and which attempted to vindicate Lott’s comments defending the onetime segregationist senator Strom Thurmond, Lott was sometimes hard on Yankees. He recalled meeting several Yale professors while he was in law school at Ole Miss. “They were young and personable,” he wrote. “But they were also liberal and had an attitude problem.” Still,

he insisted that he has an affinity with New Yorkers. “I kind of bonded a little bit more with New York City after 9/11,” he said. “I came up here and went down to Ground Zero and we held a press conference, and I remember telling the people, ‘We will get you the support that you’re entitled to.’ ” So far on his vacation, Lott, a founding member of the Singing Senators barbershop quartet, has seen “Jersey Boys” (“Loved that. It was fantastic”). He and his wife were staying at the Sofitel, near Times Square. “I usually like to eat where we’re staying,” Lott said. “We had a reservation last night at the Sofitel, so we had French cuisine, and French wine.”

With the former senator John Breaux, and both of their sons, Lott is now a partner in the lobbying firm the Breaux Lott Leadership Group. The Old Testament, it turns out, was not the only thing on his mind when he embarked on his second career. “After Katrina, I needed to get out and do something else, where I could make some money and do something for my family,” he said. (This year, the Breaux Lott Leadership Group has disclosed income of \$5.67 million from lobbying activities.) Lott, who once complained that, in the Senate, “sometimes we didn’t get home until after ten,” seemed to be enjoying his new gig, which is more relaxed than Congress, if perhaps not relaxed enough for him. “The cons are, first of all, it’s not retirement!” he said. He continued, “I tell people I pretty much do what I’ve always done, only I get paid for it now.”



Eventually, Lott took a seat on a dais, where Joseph Pascal, the president of the Hudson Union Society, attempted to conduct a Q. & A. “Thank you very much, Joe,” Lott began. “In the Senate, we have no rules on when you can speak, so I’ll begin my filibuster now!” Thirty minutes later, Lott was still talking: Gerald Ford (“He wasn’t fancy, he wasn’t gonna be a Rhodes Scholar, but he was maybe what we needed at the time”), Bill Clinton (“He was across the creek from me”), Trish (“She should have been Miss America, but she wound up losing the Miss Mississippi contest”), his former job as majority leader (“the toughest job in Washington, the toughest—even tougher than the President’s”).

Once the audience managed to get in a few Q’s to Lott’s A’s, there was no serious subject he could not deflect with a homespun crack. On corruption: “I always said, ‘If you don’t have ethics and morals before you come to Washington, you ain’t gonna grow ’em in Washington.’ ” On the economic stimulus plans: “The congressmen and senators will have a field day putting in earmarks, and if I were there I’d be putting them in!” He continued, “One year, I was actually the Prince of Pork in the Senate. I never got to be King—that kinda hurt my feelings.”

John Brademas, the president emeritus of N.Y.U. and a former congressman, rose to rib his old colleague. “I happen to be a Democrat, he’s a Republican, but I was brought up in the Methodist Church

to believe that it's never too late to be saved," he said.

"But don't you believe you can fall from grace?" Lott replied, chuckling. Then somebody asked a question about the auto bailout, and Lott started talking about how Ford would be just fine as long as they kept making the F-150, that "big old truck." ♦

To get more of *The New Yorker's* signature mix of politics, culture and the arts: **Subscribe Now**
