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THE FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

LIZ CLAIBORNE

Interviewed by
Estelle Ellis
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Q. This is a new time for designing and a new time for designers, and there's a whole new redefinition of what designer's responsibility is to the label that carries their name as well as to the customers they're serving. You have a special insight into what your name on that label and your promise is all about.

Since you are not now standing there with a pencil and drawing it, how do you do it? How do you control it? How do you insure the fact that what you started out to do when you were one, can now continue?

A. Well, I think you used a very good word. It's a heavy word—promise. I do consider that the name on the label is a confidence, or has become a confidence, to my consumer. She now trusts the way...so it is quite a job to insure that that continues. And I think it is so fabulous, the relationship that we have with our consumer. She really writes letters, she comes up and speaks to me, etc. I'm trying to also communicate that confidence to the designers that I work with.

Q. Give me a portrait of your stable of designers. How many people you work with and how you interact with them.

A. I think at the last count it was 16, for all the divisions. And I work...I still work closely with the sportswear designers because that was how we started; that was the embryo and that is still my first love. And then I work more on a weekly basis with the dress division, with the kids, with menswear, and with licensees, and I don't even "call" (?) the licensees here designers. I keep forgetting that we have bought our accessory division, and
therefore I should count those designers, but I haven't included them.

With sportswear, I'm really in on the conception, the ideas that they have—which they ask me to review with them and the product manager, because already... We discuss the ideas, the colors, the lack of color, which is something that I feel very, very strongly about. I want to make sure that there is color...

Q. Color is critical to you?

A. Critical.

Q. Why?

A. I think it's such an easy tool to make you feel good. I smile when I see yellow or orange or a beautiful shade of blue.

Q. So you want clothes to create a smile response.

A. Yes. Why not? I mean, we have to jump into clothes every morning and rush off. Why not have a little bit of a lift? I think color can do wonderful things for your mind as well as for looking well on you. I know that when I wear yellow, I look better; chartreuse—all those strange colors that people find difficult to wear. I love the way they look on me and I love the way they look on others.

Q. Will this, then, translate into a basic attitude on your part in terms of the importance of color to design, to the cosmetics even.

A. Yes. We're not there quite yet. We're not into cosmetics yet, but I think that's going to be very...
Q. That will be the translation...

A. Absolutely. Absolutely. And I do believe that most women can wear a good many colors and change their lipstick color, eyeshadow color, even the foundation color a little bit, to make it more becoming to them. But, so, color is terribly important to me, even though I know that, oh, a whole group of beiges and whites and that kind of thing can be terribly sophisticated and terribly beautiful, that can, in my estimation, be a part of the line. Other parts of the line must have color in one way or another. But I work closely... At that (?) section, the designers now go what they call "tendency sketches," just to give themselves as well as me a clearer picture of what they're talking about. They translate an idea into just a very rough kind of a color sketch of a mood of a group or... If it's going to be bright prints from the South Sea Islands, that's what this big sketch would translate. Or, it might be magazine clippings. Anything to translate the ideas visually. Designers are visual people. I am a visual person.

After that happens, then we really get much more refined as to what the actual fabrics will be, what the actual colors will be, what the prints or (?)... patterns will be. All of that I oversee. When they're ready I rush into the studio. Or, if they're having a problem, they will call me in: "Can we get your opinion on this, we're floundering a little bit?" Or, "We can't make up our minds." I'm used as a tool to help them, and to edit and test; to okay.

Q. So you make the final decision.

A. Yes. From there we, obviously, go into actual drawings.
That's the last step, even though the ideas have been there all along. We know all along we would construct a jacket and baggy pants, or we were getting into a fitted little jacket with a full skirt; whatever. The ideas have been there all along. But (?) ... in order to purchase the fabrics, we must get an idea of what the goal is going to be. I used to consider this very frustrating. You're going to ask me now what I'm going to make out of this fabric? I don't know. Well, I had to discipline myself...

Q. To know.

A. And sketch it out and think... You have to know. Because the difference in yardage between a short, skinny skirt and a long, circle skirt is almost three times the other. So, anyway, the designer already knows approximately what the pieces are and we discuss what they should be. We should have a pleated skirt this year, that's what's going on, but we feel that short, skinny skirts will finally come in, so we'll make one of those also.

Looking at the garments and editing those out in actual samples is sort of the last stage. And then you make many changes. First of all, a couple of months have gone by now, the initial planning stages, the fabric planning, purchasing, original sketches. And now we have garments and maybe we've seen trends go on or we've heard things that would make us change some of the initial concepts.

Q. Do you do some consumer testing concepts?

A. No.

Q. You don't.
A. What we will do is on one line have a couple of pieces or styles that are "reach" styles, as we call them, that we know are not in the mainstream, but I encourage that because I want to test it. That is the consumer testing. It's very hard at times to get the consumers to buy that from us, but I keep saying we must have an ongoing line and we must not edit it out, I don't care whether you sell 500 pieces and the normal cutting is in the thousands. But I want it out there simply to be tested, and we can certainly get some of our better stores to do it. So that's the way we test.

Q. Let me ask you about...From what I hear, the role that you play today as a designer, which comes through very clear in what you're saying, has as a metaphor...You do what a ballet master does in the choreography. You're choreographing a line.

A. I think that's a wonderful way to put it...

Q. Is that true? Would you feel that...?

A. Not completely.

Q. Not completely?

A. No. Because I'm not doing the creative part. The choreographer, after all, really is very creative in the way he sees movement...

Q. You're not doing that.

A. No, I am not.

Q. Then what are you...You're the major editor? You're editing?
A. Yes.

Q. All right. Now the thing that is critical to me...

A. I'm teaching. I'm teaching at the bottom end, particularly when we get new people in. I also consider myself very knowledgeable--after all these years--in the construction of garments and how they should fit. That to me is terribly important.

Q. Talk to that point.

A. First of all, we are women. I consider the woman a tremendous advantage. I get a little lost when I go up to menswear, because I can't come from the same base. But being a woman, I know what my figure faults are; I know what looks well on me; how much better I feel when something fits me well. That has as much to do with how I feel as the color does. So I'm a bug about fit. And I help the designers there, and I will insist on being in on most of the production fittings because first of all, I love it. It's really... You know, Leonard and I used to do this together....

Q. He told me, he told me.

A. It was terrible work. I mean, we would really get into it.

Q. Love it, love it.

A. And I think that is something I can contribute. I can help the designers and tell them why I think there's much too much fullness down there. I'll say, "She looks like a pear. Do you want to look like a pear?"
"No." I mean, after all, we're fitting on girls who are pretty well built, and this is another thing that I insist on. I do not fit on 5'9" girls with broad shoulders and skinny hips. We fit no taller...No limit is 5'7 1/2". I really prefer them 5'7" and I want them to have the full Size 8 measurements. Because you're kidding yourself the other way. We just hired a new model most of the designers don't want, because she's a little frumpy and she doesn't give back anything. She doesn't inspire you. I happen to think it's a good discipline. They have to work a little harder to make that garment terrific.

Q. And that's the reality.

A. That's our customer!

Q. That's the reality.

A. She's ideal compared to most of our customers. So that's another way of absolutely believing in reality.

But I teach in the beginning...Even now, we have a staff in design that is the textile design staff, where we do our own colors, our own prints, our own yarn dyes....

Q. That's important. That's a whole other design component of the company.

A. There is where I sometimes have a lot of problems. We have just been going through a print cycle and prints, as everyone admits, are very personal. And I say, yes, they may be very personal but there are just
some things I can't swallow.

Q. And that's personal!

A. I was in Hong Kong, and I blamed myself that I hadn't seen it before, but I opened...I always take all the folders and the two lines that we're working on with me so that if we're discussing sweaters or yarns or whatever, I'm fully familiar, again, with the colors, the prints, and so forth. And I opened one folder and I said, "What is this?" And I got on the phone that night and I said, "I can't believe it's already in work. It may be engraved, and we'll pay for the engraving, but that's not going on the line."

Well, they didn't quite understand why and when I came back they said...They had other prints ready for me and I picked one that was terrific. But it's very difficult to explain why you think something is ugly.

Q. But it's that personal decision factor...We talked...There's a wonderful restaurant called "La Tourme"(?)...I don't know if you've ever been there, and I hope you'll let me take you and Art for dinner one night.

A. No.

Q. There's a woman who is the chef who was a gourmet food writer, and she and her husband (he was a teacher), they bought this house. They set up this extraordinary restaurant in the Village many, many years ago. She stays in the kitchen, you never see her. But what you know...

A. I've heard of that...

Q. Have you heard of it? It's quintessential authority cooking,
but what you get is personal style in food.

A. Yes.

Q. You won't say it's New York cuisine, you won't say it's international, you won't say anything except that you know that woman's taste buds and her whole perception of how food should arrive at your table. It's superb. And that's what you're saying. We're talking about not just the personal style of the average consumer. We're talking about your personal style determining what comes through here. And that's something, you know, that is critical in terms of your putting this mark on your product, and that's what gets lost, particularly when designers now become conglomerates. And the consumer now says (being very iconoclastic, shall we say, about authority anyway), "Come on now. What does she know about eyeglasses? What does she know about chocolates? Etc." So, once you trivialize your signature in the mind of the consumer, there's no way back. And that broad brush stroke has really damaged designer line authority.

So for you now to admit that you don't even design it, but that you control the taste level of the design, the editing of it, and that in the final analysis it is what you see for yourself and what you see for the consumer....

A. What I see for the consumer, yes, because I know my own personal style but I also have learned enough about women and if you are observant, which we all should be, you know also the styles of other women. I know my style very well, but I also know that there are other women...

Q. Tell me of the styles of the women that you design for.

What kinds of women?
A. It's very varied. And that's something that I've been doing all my life, studying other women and how they look. There are certain things I won't do, you're absolutely right. Because... I don't care... Some women may love them but I'm just not going to supply that for them. But there are...

I also think of colorations. I always think of blonde women as being a little bit more feminine, or they can be very all-American but they still have a feminine kind of quality. Small boned women wear clothes and look well in different things than stronger boned women. If you have a delicate face you will look better in slightly more feminine clothes. You can do the contrary too, and that is sometimes very exciting, like putting very feminine women in very mannish clothes. But by and large you do know that there are also different tastes. We laugh about the Southeastern woman, because she is really quite different... And this is very general. She tends to wear sling back, high heeled pumps and would never be caught dead in a pair of oxfords; insists on having a soft hairdo. "Soft" is a term I hear continuously from women because they feel it would look better on them if it's "soft."

Q. Even though it's sportswear.

A. Oh, yes.

Q. How do they translate soft into sportswear?

A. It can be color, and it can be cut. I don't tend to make terribly tailored, hard edged clothes. So that even if it's a shirt, in cotton, it can't be so hard. There's generally a little softness, through the cut, through the sleeve, through the color.
Q. And the fit.

A. And the fit. Exactly. What I have found and what is very rewarding is that there are a lot of women out there who seem to be responding to this kind of thing.

I do compromise, as you well know, Estelle, and sometimes, in some of the divisions, there is not as much of my stamp as I would like there to be. During this whole print explosion in the last year...1985 was a nightmare for me.

Q. That would be a hard thing.

A. Because the dress division was going into (?). . .

Q. "Bemberg" (?) prints.

A. Yes. Big, bold, dramatic prints. The girlswear division was doing what they called street prints...I don't know if they were the colors of the street or not...Even menswear was doing prints that I didn't quite understand. And recently, since...I did not go to Europe but I did hear that there were practically no prints at (?) . . . and I said, "Thank God for that." And I went around to all the divisions and I said, "I'm on a campaign for no more bad taste prints."

Q. That's how we get away with it. We call it street fashion. Bad taste.

A. It appalls me.
Q. Let's talk about menswear for a minute. You said you're sort of less comfortable. But, something has happened to a new generation of men.

A. Yes.

Q. Who are much more like the women that you've been dressing. Why isn't it possible, then, for you to translate, in addition to which many of the women and the way they're dressing has now influenced men and how they're dressing. So tell me a little bit about why you wouldn't be comfortable in that sense, making that translation.

A. I just find it more difficult and I find that the retail atmosphere for menswear is more difficult. And, men themselves are more difficult. They're not as open minded. You're absolutely right. There's a new generation. I think it's going to take another 10-15 years before we really see a tremendous way in the way men shop, shop for themselves instead of having their wives shop for them, and shop with a little bit more of an open mind.

Q. Well, more are shopping for themselves because their wives are working and can't shop for them.

A. That's right. But they tend still... The American male still tends to be quite conservative. He still feels that being a peacock is not... it's dangerous. He will be looked upon askance.

Q. Homosexual?

A. Yes. Homosexual, and even being just too vain. Too involved
in himself. The most most businessmen can do... I was looking at one yesterday and thinking... He was so (interference; can't hear...) so perfect. The cut of his suit is superb. It was almost black, but I'm sure it was blue or charcoal. Everything so neat. Obviously this man spends a lot of time on his clothes, but so conservative. It will take years before... And this was a young man, a relatively young man, who obviously...

Q. Well, they're going back to what they think is the peer pressure of the establishment, power group.

A. He's expressing his like of clothes through the meticulousness of the way he dresses....

Q. But the growth of sportswear for men has really begun to give you some hope hasn't it?

A. Oh, yes.

Q. And accessories. The fact that they're wearing suspenders, for no reason other than that it gives them a sense of... Under the most establishment suit I've seen men wearing outlandish suspenders, and I said to them, "Tell me, why are you wearing suspenders? Is it a comfort factor? Because you haven't got a belt?" I wanted to understand. You know, you haven't got a belt suppressing your waist. He said, "No, as a matter of fact, it isn't so comfortable."

"Then why are you wearing it?"

"I don't know. I like it."
It was a statement. He was making a break away statement.

A. Oh, I agree with you, Estelle. It is happening. Obviously it's happening. It's just that I'm still amazed at how conservative certain men are. Particularly Art.

Q. Art?

A. You will never see Art in anything but.. (?)..

Q. What about the weekend?

A. Oh, the weekend, give him a pair of sweat pants and a nice big comfortable sweatshirt and he's happy.

Q. Because the most conservative man is now breaking away in evening and sportswear. Evening dress is more irreverent.

A. Really?

Q. Yes. Particularly the young men who are standing on line at the movies and at the theatre. I went to see "Precious Children" the other night..."Precious Sons," and there was a whole group of people...First of all it's also...You know, which career? We have new, breakaway careers.

A. Yes. It's not just the... it's happening. There's no doubt that it's happening. It's going to take a while.

Q. Talk about kids.

A. Kids. I have to understand more about kids, because what's
happening in kids, I gather, is really two things. The cheap business, or very expensive boutique type of things. And then in the mainstream there are ourselves and "Esprit," and very few other resources. And it all has to be fun and games. We are really styling down to the kids.

Q. We're not styling up to the kids?

A. This is what is so different in this country than in Europe. In Europe it is still the parents who dictate what the kids will wear. Maybe it's changing, I'm sure it is, but there's still a great parental influence. And they will spend time and money on kid's clothes, because they care how their kids look. Here it seems to be a kind of laissez faire attitude that whatever Suzie wants...

Q. Early independence. Early independence, at least in that area. Let them make the decisions.

A. Uh huh. And as a result of this...

Q. Day care center dressing. You see it. You see it at the day care center. The kids are really dressing themselves.

A. Absolutely. I can understand a child having great likes and dislikes and working within that, and what's the point of trying to go completely the opposite way. I think it's a difficult business because of that. Also, they're trying to emulate their bigger sisters. Their teenage sisters. The ones who are really starting with the street fashions. That's what the little girls want to look like. So...And some of the street fashion is fun and great.
Q. I think fun and games is wonderful. The whole description of that, in terms of how you dress them. Because it is for them fun and games. That's what childhood is.

A. Yes. And they, of course, respond to color, which I have no objection to. It's just, again, the prints... I wish they'd get away from prints. They think they have to decorate everything. And maybe that's a child's mentality too. He wants to decorate and finger paint. But I find that the kids are... We went down to a day care center yesterday, for various reasons, in Chinatown, and it was, of course, as most pre-school day care centers are, covered with art work of the kids, in whatever media they were working. And I thought most of it was terrific and so far above what...

Q. What you're doing.

A. What we're doing in prints. I really felt like bringing...

Q: Bringing them in to be a designer.

A. Yes, kids love this kind of stuff and they respond to it. Look at what they're doing. It's better than what we're doing.

Q. I think it's a marvelous idea. Are these the children who are the workers?

A. Yes. In Chinatown. The kids in Soho are doing it also. Their work was good.

Q. Why didn't the annual report talk about bed linens? They've
left it out completely.

A. Because it's a licensee, and also, as you may or may not be aware, Burlington has sold its bed linen division...

Q. I didn't know that.

A. ....to J.P. Stevens. It is in our contracts that we do not transfer licensees; that we are not permitted to. We will be talking to J.P. Stevens but we have skipped a season, so...at the moment, it is on hold. It's been a tough business, too.

Q. I can imagine. Let me move off this and come quickly to the most important thing that relates this to why the program has, not only your statements...And then on the back we talk in terms of the curriculum of the college. . . design, management, marketing, production. Bringing the whole thing together, tell me what you think education for the design and the young person starting out must be today, must have today, must have access to today, to be the designer for today.

A. I think most of the design students...Not all of them, but most of them, are too specific. They're too narrow. Some of them are excellent. (?) . . . is excellent. "Parsons" (?) is excellent. Parsons is excellent, even though I disagree with a lot of what they teach. I think as much art training as possible is good because it teaches you to see. It teaches you to see color, proportion, just generally to be observant. I think they spent perhaps too much time on the technical end, although I think you must learn that...
Q. Tell me what you feel about production.

A. But you know something? I never went to design school. I learned everything on the job. And sewing myself. Having that kind of background. I did take some pattern making courses because I felt a lack in that. Really, what you learn is working as an assistant designer or as a...

Q. You're saying the apprentice system is critical. Internship.

A. You can call them apprentice designers.

Q. Intern. Whatever. How many interns do you have on staff? At any one time.

A. Each designer always has one.

Q. Each designer has one.

A. Let's see...16...It's probably more because we have gals in the textile design area whose specialty or whose training is simply to match color, and that's their first step.

Q. When you interview, what do you look for?

A. You look for two things. Mainly you look for a certain amount of intelligence, enthusiasm, willingness to do anything, because there is no job here that is too small or too big for anybody. If we ask you to sweep the floor, that's what we want you to do. Being a team player. And, of course, having a sense of creativity.

Q. How do you see that?
A. They don't always have to be that creative.

Q. But how do you define...How do you determine...Does their portfolio tell this to you?

A. Yes. Their portfolio is definitely telling you what their taste level is. Some of them can't draw that well, but you can see from what they're showing you what their thought process is.

Q. So their thought process is critical. In terms of design.

A. But sometimes when you see a stunning portfolio, you are tempted to hire the person because you know that he or she can be very creative. But we've hired a few of those and sometimes they don't work out because they're too self-involved or want to move too quickly. And also, we don't want to spend six months training somebody and have them leave. I don't expect them to stay forever, obviously. They have to move on. But you do expect them to stay for a year and give back something that you have given them. And most of them are good, and get into it and stay for a long time, because they are also learning the business now, and they're learning that being a designer is a lot more than just...What we have talked about. It involves being a merchant; making sure that we can afford it, as I put it, and that means that you don't put buttons that cost 20¢ a piece all the way down. If you want this garment to retail for X, the embroidery...Let's price it out before we go wild with ideas of...You know, rhinestones all over everything...So that that kind of discipline...The discipline of being on time and getting the designs out. We work on three lines at a time continuously. We get our samples almost the
night before, and everybody has to work here to almost midnight if that's what's required. They have to work over the weekend. That's also part of the job.

Q. Is there a difference between designing and styling?

A. Yes, I think there is. But I think most designers today are stylists. I made a comment recently. . (?) . . reading some of my articles, that "Donna Karen" (?) I think is a real designer. She's a great deal more than a stylist. She knows how clothes should fit and works on them very well...

Q. Is that the difference?

A. No, it's also, really, getting down and draping and designing it, not just on paper. Many of us are stylists. I really think that I was always a stylist. I never really (?) . . as they did and discovered new cuts and what not. I don't think Calvin does that either but I think he has phenomenal taste in fabrics and how to put it together and what is right at what time. That's a stylist.

Q. Do we need more stylists today because of the pace of the fashion change,.? Than we do designers?

A. Yes. Also, I don't think the public wants all those designer clothes. I think they really want fairly simple clothes. And we can move from a tailored jacket into a cardigan and that she understands. And she will understand Donna's clothes because they're jersey and comfortable and Donna has done them so well that they look fabulous on her. But, other than those
small changes that go on, I don't think that we want terribly overdesigned clothes. The French are more receptive to that. I think American women just can't be bothered.

Q. You have 42% growth. If I said to you, what do you think is the critical factor in that growth, considering the condition of the industry as a whole, considering the fact that your dominant distribution is department stores who have been trying to find themselves, what would you say to that?

A. Well, we work harder at it. It's really true, Estelle. I mean, from every point of view. Our "sourcing" is terribly important. We have maintained our prices and are working very hard at that. We are more conscious than ever of learning what she's responding to. We're getting quite sophisticated with travelers and specialists and fashion consultants who travel to stores and who are based in certain areas, giving us feedback all the time. Good people. I mean, we have some terrific people.

Q. Most designer ads represent their superego. You, as a company, have not invested in what I call superego advertising. Why?

A. We decided when we first started not to do that. First of all, I'm not a superego person. I never was. I was never an "up front" person. I had to do more as we went into business and I learned to do it. But I always refer to us as "we"; we are a team. So that, how can you promote a team of egos? And we've all got our egos. It's different. We are a company. We are...Art often refers to the athletic teams.

Q. He told me the metaphor...He told me about the basketball...
A. And it's true. When I say we have a lot of good people here, I'm talking about a (?), Daniel, a Joan (?), a Robert (?) who's now running menswear. Not the designers...I mean, these...We try to get the best people to...

Q. How are you going to pass it on, Liz?

A. With difficulty. No...I think that this team of these younger managers...will replace me and will replace Art, but two heads will replace Art, two or three people will replace me.

Q. Doyle, Dane & Bernbach. You remember that era?

A. Yes.

Q. They broke the path to advertising and communications the way you have for the fashion industry. They set a whole new standard for advertising and criteria for excellence in design. They represented, as you did, a quartet. The strong business person, the strong designing person, the strong account person, the strong copy person. The rest is history. As those people retired, Doyle, Dane & Bernbach fell apart. Is there a way of passing this on? Or do we have to believe that a company has a life span?

A. No. We think (and that's Art's ambition)...is to perpetuate this company.

Q. What will you do to do that?

A. We are spending (and this year is critical to us) this year teaching and hiring.
Q. Teaching and hiring.

A. Or I should say, hiring and teaching. But trying to get some of the best people that we have worked with in various fields, whether it's retailers...and we've had an eye on them for a while.

Q. Why retailers?

A. There's this whole retail movement now. Because they understand the distribution of goods and whether we can continue to distribute in the same method that we are distributing now; it's not engraved in gold at all, or in steel, I should say. There may be different ways, and that's why we want the younger people aboard too. Because after all, also, if you just keep listening to four ancient (?)... you don't come out with the new, fresh ideas. You have to have that also, because they are already thinking there are other ways to do this...

Q. They're into the 21st Century.

A. Exactly. We like retailers because they have this kind of head.

Q. You don't mean that.

A. Some of them do.

Q. Well why haven't they had it for themselves?

A. Well, but I don't mean necessarily retailers from the large department stores.
Q. All right.

A. One of our more recent employees, who's bright as a whip, is from (?) . . and did all her own programs.

Q. So you're selective there too.

A. Others are not from retailing. (?) . . a jean company and spoke a language that he very quickly realized he can't speak here. But he was bright and smart and learned in six months what we were all about. But he also had new ideas about how we could better what we're doing in that area. It's through these people that I think we are going to perpetuate the company, and we're moving them around. And when (?) . . whom I think you know, and who has been with the company for quite a while, and whom I've known for a long, long time, has just been promoted to Vice President, Senior Vice President, excuse me, of corporate design.

Q. How old is she?

A. She is . . I don't know whether I should say that. I didn't realize how old she was until just the other day, when we were talking about this new role. And she's going to be taking part of my role, and working with me now. I trust her taste level. I trust her commerciality. She taught me how to be commercial!

Q. Really? What does that mean?

A. Well, I always liked her and she always liked me, but she would tell me, "Liz, I'm not going to buy that." And I'd say, "Why not, Ellen?"
"Because this color is just too difficult, the way you have..."

Q. Won't sell.

A. Won't sell.

Q. That's commercial.

A. That's commercial. And I no longer make whole "bloobs" in olive green. Which I used to indulge myself in.

Q. I don't want to take any more of your time. You were wonderful.

A. Okay. Thank you. This is probably going to be very exciting.
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