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A bicycle collector with riches enough for two museums.

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# Weeding Out The Riffraff

When Sheila Bridges lost her hair to alopecia, she traded the glamour of the limelight for more meaningful pursuits — like writing a memoir.

By PENELOPE GREEN

Sheila Bridges played the cancer card only once, when a state trooper stopped her for speeding on the Taconic Parkway.

At the time, Ms. Bridges, the interior designer Time magazine once celebrated as one of America’s best talents, was already notable for her race (as a black woman in a very white field, she stood out), her distinctive design style (a sensual and witty classicism) and her clients (music moguls like Andre Harrell, best-sellers like Tom Clancy and, famously, Bill Clinton). But she was not used to getting so much attention for her hair, or lack thereof.

In 2004, Ms. Bridges, now 49, was at a career apogee, juggling a television show, product lines, type-A suitors and high-maintenance clients, when her hair began to fall out. The diagnosis was alopecia, an autoimmune disorder. And as she recounts in “The Bald Mermaid,” her sharply told memoir, out this month from Pointed Leaf Press, rather than struggle with wigs or weaves, she decided to shave her head.

“It had reached the point when the locks I was losing were calling all the shots,” she writes. “So instead of trying to hide or deny my hair loss, I decided I would literally face it head on.”

Facing things head on is a skill Ms. Bridges has long cultivated. But like many successful women, she has found that her ability to do so has not always been embraced by her colleagues.

“Who do you think you are?” was a common rebuke when Ms. Bridges was a young assistant at Shelton, Mindel & Associates, the Manhattan architecture and design firm, and balked at being asked to wash the dishes. Because when you are black and female, a forthright and feisty manner does not always earn you points.

It is this rich tangle of sass, success and backlash that Ms. Bridges teases out in her memoir, a coming-of-age tale spiced with sex and dish. (Cornel West meets “Sex and the City” is how one friend of Ms. Bridges described it.)

Without naming names, she serves up her most confounding clients: the couple who worry that a tub in their 10-year old son’s bathroom will encourage him to masturbate; the hopped-up hip-hop artist who calls her at 2 a.m. from his Bentley (“Yo, shorty,” he says) to complain that the clouds painted on the ceiling of his child’s bedroom aren’t fluffy enough; the married

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY TREVOR TONDRO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



The designer Sheila Bridges in the Harlem apartment that has become her calling card. (The building, Graham Court, was constructed in 1901 by the Astor family and designed by the architects responsible for the Apthorp.) Before she moved in 20 years ago, the apartment was used for film shoots. That blue is Oval Room Blue from Farrow & Ball; top left, her dining room is painted in Benjamin Moore Hillside Green; far left, a French antique desk. In her front hall, left, a portrait from the 26th Street flea market; the mosaic floors are original, and the paint is Benjamin Moore Orange Blossom.

## IN THE GARDEN

# Life With Pebbles and Bam Bam



TONY CENICOLA/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Thea Alvin, a stonemason, with the helix she built in her front yard. It contains no mortar.

A stone mason with a hammer fetish and an artist’s eye coaxes rock into elegant contortions.

By MICHAEL TORTORELLO

MORRISVILLE, VT. — On May 17, the price of an act of wonder went up 2.3 percent. The stonemason Thea Alvin had been asking \$44 an hour for her extraordinary labors. After that Friday, her birthday, the same job would cost \$45.

“I typically work for my age in wages,” Ms. Alvin said. “It’s a rule I invented.”

The business of building a 50-ton stone helix on the front lawn is perhaps the definition of a specialty trade. Almost no one other than Ms. Alvin has the imagination and skill to do it.

And her life’s training would be particularly hard to emulate. Ms. Alvin grew up in a commune (which, on second thought, may have been a cult), parted with the Grateful Dead when she was 5, spent the better part of a school year in her bedroom under a kind of “solitary confinement” and eloped at 18 and raised three children in a cabin with no running water. The experi-

ence has left her with a creative disposition and an underdeveloped interest in capitalism.

“Because my lifestyle is so low budget, I don’t need to do a lot of work for a lot of money,” Ms. Alvin said. She made a patio and a fire pit at her dentist’s home in exchange for a new tooth. “I barter for food all the time,” she added.

Ms. Alvin does a lot for her friends in the neighborhood, the scruffy little hamlets that ring the well-groomed ski principality of Stowe. On a recent Thursday morning, she offered a driving tour of her ambit.

One of the first stops was a yak farm where she had rehabbed a retaining wall below the barn. Across from the state Capitol in Montpelier, a little ways down the road, she had installed a 12-ton mound of environmental art. This was a meditation in slate on the power of storms and floods.

One job was as good as the other. Wherever you set it, a stone is a stone.

To the extent that her craft involves breaking rocks in the hot sun, Ms. Alvin appears to be having fun. She wields a 4-pound maul that she calls Garfield. “It’s short and fat,” she said, “and really likes

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ANDREA WYNER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

## Ancient Turf, Rotten Wood, Killer Views

In the foothills of the Alps, a family home built on the rubble of ancestors. Page 5