

AND ALL THE
QUEEN'S MEN

AND ALL THE QUEEN'S MEN



a memoir by
Dale Engelson Sessa

DUNHAM
books

And All the Queen's Men

Copyright © 2013 Dale Engelson Sessa

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, scanning, or otherwise, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review. For information on licensing or special sales, please contact:

Dunham Books
63 Music Square East
Nashville, Tennessee 37203

Trade Paperback ISBN: 978-1-939447-01-2
Ebook ISBN: 978-1-939447-02-9

The names of the men that appear in the chapter headings have been changed to provide a measure of privacy.

Printed in the United States of America

*for Joe,
who put my life back together again*

Contents

Prologue: <i>A Child living in South Carolina and Philadelphia</i>	1
Chapter One: <i>A Teenager visiting California</i>	11
Chapter Two: <i>Ellis, my first Husband</i>	45
Chapter Three: <i>Myles, my second Husband</i>	115
Chapter Four: <i>Aaron, a man I adored a long time ago</i>	198
Chapter Five: <i>Jeffrey, a boyfriend who saved me</i>	228
Chapter Six: <i>Art, my “Significant Other”</i>	258
Chapter Seven: <i>Joe, my third Husband</i>	306
Epilogue: <i>The result of my inner search</i>	346

Prologue

A Child living in South Carolina and Philadelphia

I've always been driven to create order out of bedlam—especially in my personal life. To understand what a challenge this has been, you'd have to know my parents and as he would have wanted it, the best place to start is with my father. Every move he made was a calculated one chosen to suit his personal interests with little or no regard for others. He was not above using my sister and me to achieve his unsavory goals—whether it was taking us along on a business trip as a cover to meet his mistress or choosing my intended husband for his own benefit when I was only sixteen.

He was a different sort of man, which given his upbringing, I concede may not have been entirely his fault. He was tight-lipped with us about his past, but the way I understand it from fragments of family history, my father was raised in an almost Dickensian manner without parents since his early teens and was loosely tethered thereafter to a cadre of older brothers scattered around the city of Baltimore. Scuffling from place to place, he dropped out of high school and took on menial jobs to make ends meet. My father was quite clever and resourceful, and by the time he was fifteen, he had earned—or perhaps conned—enough money to buy himself a butter yellow Ford convertible. At the time, in my proud father's eyes, it was the most glamorous car money could buy.

A flashy car can bring a world of self-confidence to a young ambitious man and my father was no exception. He managed to hook my mother like a guppy in a fishbowl one fine afternoon when they were both vacationing in Atlantic City. They spent that first day strolling the boardwalk and in the evening, he invited my mom and her older sister to see Louis Prima and Keely Smith who were performing at the Steel Pier, the biggest and priciest show in town. Although she sensed he might be a difficult man with a low verbal filter, my mom was smitten by his charisma and good looks, and virtually overnight, she found her calling: Putting up with him.

I am nothing like my mother or my father.

My father insisted his first, middle, and last names were “Benjamin Benjamin Benjamin,” and although it was certainly unusual, we had no reason to disbelieve him. Our mom simply called him Ben and I vividly recall him instructing her to embroider B.B.B. on all of his shirt pockets, socks, handkerchiefs, and bathrobes as though he were a latter-day Gatsby.

He also claimed to be a descendent of the illustrious Judah P. Benjamin who was the Confederate States Attorney General and the first Jewish man seriously considered for nomination to the U.S. Supreme Court. This Mr. Benjamin was the first Jew—or at least the first one to admit it—to be elected to the U.S. Senate. After many attempts over the years to find a link between Senator Benjamin from the 1800’s and our family, I am fairly certain none exists. My father clearly had his own version of the truth and like other blowhards of years gone by; he had the advantage of telling his tales before the invention of the Internet.



In the mid 1950’s, we lived in the South, which was far different than

being raised in other parts of the country. I'm not proud to tell the story of our devoted Carrie, right out of central casting for a southern African American nanny. She was an exceptional woman who did the housework and cared for our entire family. One of the cabinets in the kitchen was segregated for the plates, glasses, and utensils used for her meals and they were never to mingle with our own. As a child I conjured up all kinds of rationales for this, including that we would morph into Carrie's skin color if our cereal bowls touched hers. But I went along, not knowing any better and presuming it was like this in everyone's home.

When it was time to receive her wages, Carrie unfurled a ragged old handkerchief and my mother would lower the bills inside rather than risk their hands touching. She had a special way of twisting the handkerchief around the money in a tiny, bunched-up knot looking much like a long-eared bunny. When she fed us dinner and gave each of us our daily bath, Carrie would tell us stories, once explaining how chocolate milk came from brown cows and regular milk came from the light-colored ones. It made perfect sense to me and to reveal just how long I believed this would be far too embarrassing.

Growing up, the word *chocolate* seemed to be multi-purposed in our home. Once, when Carrie was on her knees scrubbing the kitchen linoleum floor to a mirror high sheen, I watched quietly for a while and then walked right up and planted a kiss on her damp cheek.

"You work too hard, Carrie. Here, let me help you." Mom was nearby and witnessed the kiss. She pulled me away into another part of the house.

"We don't kiss the help, honey." I was confused in that way a child would be.

"But why can't I kiss her, like I kiss you and Daddy?"

"Because, Dale, because she's—uh—she's chocolate."



My mom would often take my older sister, Nan, my little brother,

Donnie, and me for scenic drives all through the small town of Orangeburg, South Carolina where we lived and where my brother and I were born. Setting out from our white clapboard house, we'd gaze out the car windows at vast acres of walnut farms and cotton fields where, during certain months of the year, the dark crispy skins of the crammed cotton plants would burst wide open and fluffy white balls would emerge along the limbs. It always reminded us of corn popping on the O'Keefe & Merritt stove in our kitchen at home.

Mom had the most talented right foot in town, threading the family's two-tone Oldsmobile Ninety-Eight between parked cars on both sides of the narrowest of streets. She mastered the ornamental iron peddle on her Singer sewing machine with the same technique as the accelerator and brake on the Oldsmobile. It was not unusual for her to make clothing for my sister and me. For special occasions she would whip up extravagant dresses, attaching delicate pleating and tucking with admirable ease.

Nan and I appear at ages six and eight in a black and white snapshot standing wobbly-kneed in front of our home. Preening in our best frothy spring dresses complete with lace-trimmed ankle socks, we wore patent-leather sandals we had rubbed with butter to preserve the leather and add some sheen. In the photo, my bangs are feathered away from my face with silly-looking satin ribbons I'm certain my father arranged for me. At any rate, I am wincing in the picture either from squinting at the sun or the embarrassing discomfort of being photographed without those bangs to cover my round, dimpled face. Even as an adult, he continued to push my heavy dark bangs away from my forehead.

"Stop hiding that pretty face," he would say in a manner that was far more controlling than complimentary. My father also shouted impatiently at our mother if she needed extra time to apply make-up or arrange her hair in a complicated updo, which was the style of the day. He was unable or maybe unwilling to acknowledge female preferences or emotions. And, when he said, "Let's go," he meant, *Now!*

By this time, my uncles on my father's side operated a whole raft of men's shoe stores across the Southern states. They managed to bring him into the family business, which resulted in my father owning the biggest shoe store in downtown Orangeburg, the town's population being 1,500 at the time. We visited him often and I sincerely believed he was one of the city's most famous and popular men. After all, he owned an entire store! He was truly a great salesman and I don't think I saw anyone ever leave the store empty-handed. Once, he even sold a customer two left shoes when one of his shipments got botched. He was amazingly kind to his customers as well as his employees.

As I grew a little older and witnessed the contrast in my father's temperament at home and in public, it began to occur to me that the well-established Mr. Benjamin was neither the kind family man nor the Southern benefactor the townspeople believed him to be. This place where I lived was perhaps just like Orangeburg—a small town with great big secrets.

Images from the years living there now shuffle through my mind, kind of like watching a slide show running through an endless loop. Every day was about the same at our house. We kids played outdoors and Mom, with her beautiful voice, sang along with soft Sinatra music on the radio while she did her sewing. At five-thirty pm, Carrie completed her housework and left for the day. It was a pleasant routine—that is until my father came home from work. The atmosphere of our house changed radically, filling with drama—loud angry voices, frequent bawling, and slamming doors. Many times I would find solace in the bedroom I shared with Nan where I would read my favorite books, dress and redress my dolls, and draw pictures with colorful crayons in an attempt to block the quarrelsome sounds that nonetheless filtered down the hall and into our safe haven.

Mom was the martyred wife whose affections were focused on her children, wearing her need for love on her sleeve. A young, beautiful, naïve woman, she was everything Dad was not—available, demonstrative, gracious, and diplomatic. Sometimes, when I heard my mom

weeping, I wanted so badly to comfort her, but I was afraid to enter the master bedroom in case my father was there too. Often, I found myself sobbing into my own pillow while an unspeakable coldness invaded our house. I became afraid to trust my father's casual kindnesses, always uncertain what might be lurking beneath. When Mom tucked me in at night she always said, "Don't forget your daddy loves you." It was as though she felt she had to convince me because otherwise I would never have known. Immobilized and awestruck in my father's presence, he terrified me. And yet still, I loved him, desperately wanting to know whom he really was, to find resolve and bring some goodness into our father-daughter relationship.

Growing up, I vainly tried to flatter a father who had trouble expressing the most basic paternal sentiments. Because of this, our family just wasn't comfortable together. Our parents' relationship was dysfunctional even before they had children. But, like many kids living in unhappy family situations, I had a skewed view of my responsibility for their problems. I constantly tried to please both of them under the mistaken belief that it would, in turn, help them please one another. Of course, my childish efforts were doomed to failure.

Every summer, we went on holiday to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. This location has become a very popular seaside resort, but back in the 50's, it was merely a sleepy vacation spot offering limited entertainment such as swimming and board games like Checkers and Parcheesi. This was a place where middle class families like ours socialized with other middle class families. Although we stayed at a motel with a swimming pool, my siblings and I always opted to bicycle through the sun-drenched streets down to the ocean several blocks away. Halfway there, the sharp heady scent of salt air would tantalize my nostrils and soon the dazzling blue surf dotted with faraway swimmers riding crests of towering waves would come into view. The beach was immense—especially to a six year old. I'd excitedly toss aside my bike and sandals and run as fast as I could, feeling the sand between my toes, stopping only momentarily to ease my way into the bone-

chilling cold of the sea.

One day, I almost drowned—at least that’s how I remember the incident when wave after rolling wave slapped me roughly about. For what seemed at the time like several long minutes, I was unable to suck in any air, and the water rose, tossing and swirling my small body round and round. All I could hear was a massive swooshing sound, but somehow I managed to drag myself out of danger. I don’t remember my family members attempting a rescue or that any of the scattered beachgoers awaited my safe return onshore. Naturally, I thought that after my scary brush with death, I had—at least for one brief moment—earned a place at the center of the universe. I was very upset that no one seemed to notice or care when, half naked after losing the little skirt of my two-piece swimsuit in the raging surf, I wrapped a beach towel around my bottom. Making wet footprints in the sand, I slowly made my way up the water’s edge, encountering sand in places that made me very uncomfortable.



When my father had a craving for bagels and smoked salmon or Mom fancied something special, the whole family would drive to Columbia, the state capital. Orangeburg was a rather simple town where you could find any essential, but our mom’s beautiful party dresses, Dad’s coats made of cashmere and the taffeta material for my new pink bedspreads and curtains were all available to us in Columbia. To me it was some sort of miracle that the biggest city I could ever have imagined was only an hour’s drive from our home.

Fascinated by the ever-changing scenes flashing by as we looked out the car windows along the highway, we often spotted chain gangs of prisoners shackled to each other on the sides of the road. Driving by a snaking line of intense-looking men wearing what appeared to an innocent child to be one-piece striped pajamas, I once questioned Mom about this peculiar sight. She replied that those men had done really bad things, but were let out of jail during the day to repair the highway.

Equating my mom's explanation to a bunch of well-intentioned men in PJ's, I guilelessly looked forward to passing the chain gang on each visit to Columbia, eager to see the progress they were making on our roads. For a long time, I naively believed that these men were lucky to get out into the sunshine for the day and also pretty smart to remain linked together so no one would risk getting lost.

Throughout most of the years in Orangeburg, my parents insisted that my sister Nan and I each wear a small Star of David necklace fashioned of gold. We were told that we were the only Jewish family in our scarcely populated city and that this symbol identified us as being Jewish. We were obedient children and always did what we were told, but we had no idea what "being Jewish" meant or what it represented.

During the Christmas holidays, a brightly lit tree was displayed in the front window of every single house within miles of where we lived. The entire neighborhood was blanketed with decorations, inside and out, right down to the shutters, the front doors, lanterns, and shrubs. At our home, we had poinsettias and amaryllis (purchased in Columbia) and my mother hung mistletoe for the kids. There was no way that Dad would offend the neighbors and jeopardize losing local business by snubbing the most essential non-Jewish holiday in the country, going so far as to disguise himself as a rather authentic Santa who strolled the nearby streets handing out candy. We all received generous gifts on Christmas morning, but Mom and Dad drew the line at buying a tree, refusing to allow one in our home.

"It defines people as Christians," Dad would say. "We're Jewish."

For many years, I was bewildered about our religion, assuming from the attitude and actions of my parents that there must have been a component of shame to it. I innocently and stupidly made the grave error of informing the kids at school of my heritage. My friends embarrassed me—although I don't think they intended to. After all, they spoke with the same heavy Southern accent as I did. I was often invited for play dates at their homes, but as soon as I arrived, they would march me right up to their mothers and, pointing out my necklace

would ask in earnest, “Dale, say something in Jewish.”

I always surmised they were talking about the Jewish prayers that Mom said over the candles for the requisite seven nights of Chanukah. I really had no idea where she learned those peculiar words that sounded feverish and scared me a little. I found myself wishing I were Christian like the others. At least they didn't have to wear a star-shaped necklace or live with restrictions. I decided that when I was ready to have a child of my own, it would definitely be a Christian baby. It didn't matter if it were a boy or a girl as long as it was a Christian. I truly loved Christmas trees.



Shortly before I turned seven, we moved to Philadelphia. This was the city where my sister was born, where my mother was born and raised, and where her parents, as well as four siblings, still lived. Much to Dad's brothers' chagrin, he gave up the shoe business and transitioned into a starter sales position for Globe Rubber, a consumer rubber corporation. In time, in large part due to his skillful marketing, the company grew remarkably prosperous.

Our maternal grandfather, Jacob Stark, parked himself day in and day out in an orthodox synagogue down the street from his family home where he would pass the hours wailing in prayer. When women and children were allowed to attend, I begged Grandmom Lizzy to take me along. As is the custom at orthodox synagogues, women are relegated to the upstairs level. The ground floor is sacred, reserved solely for the alpha males who don "tefillin." I would lean way over the balcony and observe the men looping black leather bands around their forearms, trapping underneath small hollowed boxes. Grandmom said that they contained verses from the Torah. To me, it was like a Houdini trick to fit all those prayers written on parchment into this teensy square container.

All the men wore sad dark suits, the only embellishment a "tallis," the white silky scarf draped long around their necks. With the tips of

his fingers, Grandpop would hypnotically knead the tassels along the border of his tallis and occasionally bring them up to his pursed lips like a little kiss, as his body swayed back and forth in solemn verse. This was serious stuff and although I found the yowling exotic as though in a foreign land, it made me uncomfortable and a little bit nauseous.

One day, I bought my grandpop a long, red silk scarf with some allowance money I had saved. He looked at me quizzically, like “What in the world would I do with that?” Recognizing his confusion, I said, “For you—your neck... you know... at the synagogue.” He responded with nothing more than a low grunt and a few words in Hebrew to my grandmom while she refolded the scarf in the original tissue paper and handed the box back to me with a kind smile.

I looked down at the gift I had wrapped all by myself. “But, it will brighten up your suit, Grandpop... don’t you like it?” Clearly, I didn’t understand the standardization of prayer shawls.

Later on, I learned the authentic tassels actually contained special twined and knotted fringes on each of the four corners. Still, his mostly silent, unexplained rejection of the gift hurt my feelings. I sulked as I trudged away from my grandparents with the gift under my arm, the lengthy ribbon that had once looked so pretty on the gift box abjectly trailing along the floor behind me.

In our house, children were to be seen and not heard, except that is, for showing us off during certain social engagements held at our home. On these occasions, Nan and I were sometimes obliged to “Dance for Daddy.” Our father requested us to wear certain dresses, sing certain songs, and dance certain dances for our visitors. We were told to complete our routines by dropping to one knee in a deep curtsy, and following that, we were then to look into the eyes of the guests while modestly awaiting applause. After the clapping faded, we were promptly told by our father to “scram.”

This was when I learned we should probably not expect praise of any kind. If the guests applauded—fine. If they didn’t—that was fine too. My father always said that waiting for praise was disrespectful.

Chapter One

A Teenager visiting California

It was never a good idea to question my father's motives. He had elected to ship my brother, Donnie, off to summer camp in the Poconos, while treating Mom, my older sister, and me to the extravagance of the Beverly Hilton Hotel in Beverly Hills, California. I had just turned sixteen and our family, sans Donnie, was about to begin our third consecutive vacation at this famous hotel a world away from our home in Philadelphia.

"But it's not fair," I had whined prior to the trip, aware that my tone was unacceptable to my father. "Donnie never gets to come with us."

"Rae, tell her," he ordered Mom, already washing his hands of the decision not to bring my brother along. I adored Donnie, the sibling who could have been my brown palette twin, whereas our sister was light haired and green eyed. And just like that, my father would place the blame on our mom, who would not have excluded one of her children for a quick run to the supermarket, let alone a family vacation if she had her way—which of course, she did not.

"Your brother is still young, sweetheart," Mom said. "He needs too much attention. Your dad and I thought he'd be happier at summer camp again this year."

“Oh sure,” I thought suspiciously, but wisely didn’t say aloud. Soon enough, I would learn why Donnie was left behind.



Weeks later, we were settled into our beautiful hotel in sunny California. It was a near perfect day, the blue brilliance of summer so gratifying after a long, gray winter on the East coast. Mom and Dad were tanning themselves on colorful chaise lounges while I sat only a few yards away from them, dangling my feet in the hotel pool and distracted by pleasant thoughts of my date from the previous evening.

“So, what business is his family in?” My father called over to me unexpectedly.

I could barely process the question above a flurry of activity around the pool—or maybe I just wished I hadn’t heard him.

“I don’t really know. I think his father builds houses,” I responded in a not quite grown-up voice. At that very moment it occurred to me that if my father had sported a handlebar mustache, he would surely have been twirling it with a flourish. However, Dad was always clean-shaven and neat, a short, dark-haired man with a slender frame.

“Find out tonight, will you?” he asked.

I had only turned sixteen at the beginning of the year and unbelievably, my father was already trying to assess the size of my date’s bank account! Collecting my pool towel, I wrapped it around my body like a sarong and hooked a tote bag into the crook of my arm before providing a vague reply.

“If it comes up,” I tried to appear nonchalant while still blocking out the poolside clamor.

“*Bring it up, Dale. Hear me?*”

It was no longer an appeal, but a loud, dictatorial command. As always, my father relished setting up situations so he’d have the opportunity to go ballistic over some insignificant detail. I leapt from

the pool ledge and darted toward him where he had already bolted upright from his prone position.

Pressing a shushing finger to my mouth, I said, “Okay.” Motioning to the few heads that had already turned our way at my father’s conspicuous bellow, I deliberately stretched the syllables of the word to be absolutely sure he heard me, “O-k-a-y...”

All too familiar with his uncontrollable temper and my abject fear of it, I knew if this conversation escalated, it would soon become quite a spectacle. I was the one member of our family who would always give into a squabble just to make it stop, a quiet child who despised fights and drama. My father’s vicious and petty outbursts frequently brought me to tears.

At that moment, my name was announced by a female voice that floated over the pool’s P.A. system with all the solemnity and importance of a sacred occasion.

“Paging Miss Benjamin. Miss Dale Benjamin... Miss Benjamin, please.”

During the day, my new Los Angeles friends would often contact me in this way, and instinctively, everyone turned to catch sight of the person being summoned. Feeling self-conscious and bare, I quickly surveyed the pool area for the nearest house phone spotting one near the bar.

“Hello?”

“Hi gorgeous. It’s Ellis.”

“Oh, hi Ellis. How are you?”

“Fine, but are you okay? You sound a little shaky.”

I knew my voice was a bit strained. After all, my dad had just been trying to assess Ellis’ father’s profession—read financial situation.

“No—no, all’s well. We’re just going up to the room. It’s been a long day with a lot of sun, but looking forward to tonight.” Running my fingers through the long damp waves of my black hair, I couldn’t help but think of all the work that would be needed to make it date-worthy straight for the evening.

We said our goodbyes and I hung up. Twinkling inwardly as I walked back to my parents, I was eagerly anticipating my fifth date with Ellis, who was after all, a sweet, kind, great-looking guy. Thinking back to the charming wind-up of the night before at one of the neighborhood Mexican restaurants, I had blushed when a group of Mariachis serenaded us with a bunch of songs he had requested as though we were the only customers in the restaurant.

“I’m impressed. How do you know all those songs, Ellis?”

Stabbing his fork at the last bite of chili relleno on his plate, he answered affably. “Well, lots of things... I was in Spain a few years back and we go to Mexico all the time.” The food and décor were so unusual, I felt like a true foreigner, especially when he added, “Tijuana’s border is very close to L.A., you know.”

I didn’t know, but nodded my head in knowing agreement nonetheless.

“And, *Bésame Mucho*—doesn’t that mean kiss me much?” I asked, privately thinking those two and a half years of high school Spanish might finally come in handy. I had never actually tasted Mexican food; as far as I knew, it didn’t exist in Philadelphia.

“Kiss me a lot,” Ellis corrected politely.

My face reddened a little with embarrassment, but I hoped he didn’t notice in the semi-darkness of the restaurant. At the end of the meal, the waiter refilled our coffee cups and returned them to us in reverse.

“Oh, that was mine—see the lipstick mark?” I commented good naturedly, reaching for my cup.

“I think I’ll hold onto yours,” Ellis said. “I kind of like it—sort of a coffee kiss.”

I watched while he took a long, drawn-out sip from the cup, deliberately planting his lips atop my prominent imprint.

“Y-u-c-k. You don’t use sugar,” he said, reversing the cups again. “Hmmm... I’ll have to get my kiss the old-fashioned way.”

I had become so accustomed to my dad’s acerbic style that Ellis’

genuine and uncomplicated air of affection came as quite a charming surprise.

Earlier that summer, a friend of mine had introduced the two of us at Frascati's on Wilshire Boulevard, a popular restaurant within walking distance of our hotel. I had instantly been overwhelmed by Ellis' arresting good looks as he presented himself at our table that evening in his snappy U.S. Navy uniform. A tall, "older" gentleman of twenty-four, he was dapper and trim with dark hair and inky-blue eyes, the personification of handsome. It was an added bonus—although I didn't know it at the time—that his bank account would also satisfy my parents' definition of handsome.

Jolted back from my reminiscing, I scurried about to help pack the family's pool gear into canvas bags and Mom, Dad and I headed for the nearest elevator. I must say that the ugly cloud of my father's recent demand had overshadowed a beautiful day and the anticipation of a beautiful evening. As the three of us waited impatiently at the bank of elevators, my father suddenly grasped my bare arm and locked his eyes with mine. Cue the spiel.

"Tell me, Dale. How many girls do you know... the privileges—that pretty face... school president... prom queen?" He paused momentarily. "Can't you help me out, Rae?" He would invariably blame my mom for his gaps of memory.

"Why Ben, did you forget she was voted most popular girl in her class?" Mom would wrap up the asset list while looking blissfully at her prodigy.

"Please! Can we please just end this conversation?" I asked, confused about the direction it was headed. Turning to my father, I also said, "Why are you asking about Ellis' family? What difference does it make? And you and Mom are talking about my school record like I'm not even here."

"Are you really that naïve, Dale?" My father questioned as I glowered at him. "You're going to have to decide what it is you want. Why are you looking at me that way?" he grimaced. "You think it all hap-

pens by magic—your little land of plenty?”

I knew enough to be quiet now. He always gave off clear signals when he didn't wish to be challenged further. This familiar routine triggered a sort of complicated dispute with him inside my head. Although I had a massive crush on Ellis, I had certainly given no thought to being someone's wife anytime soon.

‘Why was he posturing like this?’ I asked myself. ‘Could he possibly have been thinking about marrying me off? Did he imagine I would go along with such a ridiculous idea?’

I spotted my sister in the distance, her soft mane of reddish-brown hair swaying around her shoulders as she strode with purpose, scanning the pool area in search of the rest of us. Thankfully, her arrival provided me with the perfect opportunity to change the subject.

“Nan! We're over here... Nan!” I shouted. She didn't seem to hear me over all the chattering. My sister was only two years older than I, yet she was far more worldly—at least I thought so. Physically, you'd never believe we were related, let alone sisters. She had light green eyes the color of the sea on a sun-filled day, and flawless, porcelain skin. Nan was an amazing looking girl, even though her weight had a habit of getting away from her. Whenever I'd sometimes tell her how lovely she looked when her self-image needed a boost, she'd counter with some pessimistic retort.

“Don't be crazy, Dale. You'd have to be blind not to notice the guys checking you out when we walk around the hotel. They dig brunettes anyway, 'specially with killer suntans.”

“Not true! Maybe you move around here with your eyes half shut,” I'd tease her. We had always been extremely close and I adored her delightful, self-deprecating humor.

“Okay, Dale. If you happen to find a guy who's into mousy hair and skin that looks like bleached flour, go ahead and tell him you have a sister.”

I often wondered if Nan's insecurities were the result of her conflicts with our father. She had been shepherded along on these

California vacations from ages sixteen through eighteen, not coincidentally the same years she had become serious with Jerry, her Philadelphia boyfriend. My father repeatedly argued with her about the necessity of putting space—preferably permanent—between the two of them. Clearly, Jerry was my father’s nemesis.

“That cockamamie guy runs a hoagie stand, for Chrissake!” he shouted. “How do you think he’d support you, let alone kids? I sure hope you’ll all love those hoagies—breakfast, lunch, and dinner.”

Our dad ridiculed her with an ongoing mix of put-downs. He used income as a measuring stick and marriage itself as a social upgrade. Poor hoagie-slinging Jerry didn’t have a shot—especially when pitted against someone like Ellis.

I recall how devastated Nan was on this particular trip when once again she had to leave her sweetheart for the summer under our father’s unrelenting orders. Ultimately, she and I both knew they’d be back together again regardless of what he said or did to try to prevent it. Nan was headstrong and had learned how to manipulate our father in order to make him think she was complying. In fact, she wrote daily postcards to Jerry. Scouring the hotel lobby to be sure no one was watching, she’d secretly pay the postage herself so it would not appear on our father’s account.



Only a few weeks earlier, my family had been enjoying breakfast in the hotel coffee shop, seated in the booth reserved for us next to a big sunny window. My very first date with Ellis had taken place the evening before and not coincidentally, my father chose this particular morning to invoke his most fervent conviction. Looking squarely at me from the head of the table, he started in with his usual harangue—

“Trust me Dale... and listen very carefully.” His hazel eyes were searing. “Los Angeles is the only spot in the country to raise happy children.”

I should have been accustomed to his spitting out whatever popped in his mind, but somehow it always seemed that his speeches came out of the blue. My sister barely managed to stifle her laughter and neither of us could believe our ears as we listened to his high voltage display. Oblivious to our reactions, my father never tired of hearing himself pontificate.

“How can you say that?” I shot back. It was not in my nature to challenge anyone, particularly him, but this time I couldn't let him get away with such an absurd statement.

“Because Philadelphia is in decay,” he said. “That's why! You need to marry a Californian and the sooner the better.” He watched as I rolled my eyes in outrage. “I guess you think you know more than me now. Is *that* it?”

“Dad, there are people living in happy homes and children filled with hope in every city you can name—including Philadelphia!” I was on a roll now and it was too late to back down. “I think a child is happy for lots of other reasons.”

My father had a certain way of biting and pursing his lips just before percolating over with rage. It was time for me to shut my mouth. Nonetheless, a powerful belief screamed so loud inside my head, I thought my brain might erupt and lay in pieces all around me.

You and Mom eventually want to move to Los Angeles with its perfect weather and its beautiful beaches and pretty people... and if you get me to marry and move here, you'll have all the motivation you need! At sixteen, I was young, but not stupid.



“Wait up!” Nan called out to us, a beach towel strategically camouflaging her generous curves. She was out of breath, dripping water and shivering from a prolonged swim. I ran ahead to ward her off.

“Dad's on a bend about Los Angeles.”

Nan tossed me a helpless expression that signaled, “I know, I

know,” while running up and planting a cursory kiss on each of our parent’s cheeks.

“Did you have a good swim, dear?” Mom inquired.

“Fabulous! I hated to leave the pool, but my skin’s turned to shriveled grapes.”

Mom wrapped her arms tightly around Nan, briskly kneading her towel-cloaked body, chiding gently, “Why honey, you’re almost blue.”

“Nan, we were having a private conversation with Dale,” my father chimed in, as if he were trying to push her out of focus. That was exactly what my bold sister needed to begin mimicking our father and reciting his customary pitch.

“Oh, my little princess, have you forgotten this family lives on the right side of the tracks in that exclusive Philadelphia suburb?” she said.

Hearing Nan fearlessly imitate his voice—using all the bravado I certainly lacked—my father’s nostrils began to flare. Audible huffs of air sounding like those of a raging bull soon followed. His obvious dissatisfaction did not faze her. In fact, it goaded her on. I suppressed laughter while she continued.

“Do you know just how few, young ladies have the benefit of a background like yours? Dale, sweet little cherub, what exactly is wrong with you? Why, you have a...”

“Enough!” shrieked my father, bringing the monologue to a standstill. By then, several hotel guests moved in groups towards the elevators and even he recognized that the place for such a heated discussion was inappropriate. I had heard the “Let me remind you who you are” lecture too many times to count.

In hindsight, it became clear to me that this was the year my parents had begun the process of husband shopping for both of us. I finally understood that my younger brother would have just been in the way. Aside from the unsavory concept of them attempting to find a husband for me when I was only sixteen, they also chose to dictate where I should live with my phantom husband. This ruled out my na-

tive city and anyone known to me in my current arena of friends and acquaintances. I loved Philadelphia. How could I even conceive of moving to a strange city, leaving my family and the friends I'd known and valued for most of my life? But I was not immune to the 'please your parents' mantra deeply instilled in me and in that particular year, on that particular vacation, I did indeed find my prospective mate in the landscape of Dad's choosing. The manhunt would soon be called off.



I did live on a gorgeous, tree-lined street called Meeting House Lane in the storied Main Line of Lower Merion, a Philadelphia suburb of historic stone houses and artistic families. Our residence was home to the five of us who shuffled in and out of well-appointed rooms and sat down to dinner together almost every evening.

For years, my father had repeated his favorite motto to me: "You can marry a rich man just as easily as a poor one." It had not originated with him, but might as well have, for he certainly made it his own. His catchphrase was lost on me, maybe because I was too young or too afraid to ask for an explanation. And yet, perhaps through a prism of innuendo, I had always known my parents to have lofty marital plans for me.

They incessantly gloated to friends, neighbors, my father's colleagues, and even near-strangers, that I was a stellar high school student, like they were pimping me out. When I was appointed valedictorian for my senior graduation, they unabashedly announced it to the world—at least to our world.

It was painfully embarrassing to be anywhere nearby when they would boast about my achievements. The truth is I was well aware that I was always neat, the teacher's pet, the obnoxious one who raised her hand to answer every question, but I was never the type of girl to brag. And, as I think about it now, the lines are blurred

between being an excellent student and being terrified *not* to be an excellent student, hoping never to experience my father's wrath or to be subject to his disciplinary action.



I was ecstatic over my dates with Ellis. The summer month spent in his company was seared into my memory and I fantasized that I would remember him for as long as I lived or maybe even longer. I had never before experienced the euphoria of a real romance. Thrilled to have reached a state of perfect happiness, I found myself almost oblivious to everything else. Ellis' smile lingered in my mind's eye. His skin was so smooth and white that it made his blue eyes look almost fake—like decorative blue marbles.

With my parents' blessing after our sixth date, I began to skip our family breakfast and pool rituals, leaving the hotel in the early mornings. Ellis and I would spend entire days and evenings with one another, cramming as much time as possible into our remaining week together.

With only a few days of our trip left, we were wandering hand-in-hand at a relaxed pace along Will Rogers State Park, not far from Santa Monica and the beautiful beaches. The hills were tinted with late afternoon gold, like a canvas painted by a skillful artist.

"I was thinking," Ellis said. "Why don't we have our parents meet before you all go back to Philadelphia?"

The idea was rather unnerving to be honest. I said nothing at first, taking a little time to compose my response.

"So, what do you think?"

He pressed me for my answer, wrapping his arms tightly around my waist. To be honest, I wasn't really keen on the notion. No one in my family knew—not even Nan, that I had already been in Ellis' home and for that matter, had met his entire captivating family—his parents, a younger brother, and a middle sister. His house located

directly in Beverly Hills proper, only a dozen or so blocks away from our hotel, was immense and exquisite.

“Dale, are you afraid of something?”

“No, just not sure. Give me a day to think it over.”

The sight of Ellis’ family home would be manna from heaven to my parents, but I would never hear the end of it, if for any reason, my relationship with him ended.

Ellis had already joined our family for dinner a couple of times at the hotel’s legendary Trader Vic’s, a restaurant with an exotic décor and soothing sounds of Hawaiian music. Nan and I always giggled about ordering the pupu platter, which was, despite its silly name, a delicious assortment of Cantonese appetizers.

For debriefing purposes, Dad insisted on seating Ellis right next to him in the spacious, circular booth. “Now that you’re out of the Navy, what do you intend to do for a living?” he’d ask, along with other subjects of that nature.

I had become crazy about Ellis—this beautiful man who charged my heart, a native Angelino when there were precious few. *So, should the families meet?* I asked myself, constantly vacillating between “yes” and “not sure,” as Ellis stood waiting for my answer the next day. We strolled along Franklin Canyon and found ourselves standing in a field of clover. I bent down and with my eyes closed, plucked one single cluster of tiny little petals, placing it in Ellis’ palm and wrapping his hand around it.

“If it only has three leaves, we’ll go ahead and do the parent thing,” I offered the challenge cheerfully.

“Deal,” Ellis agreed, as he exposed the three-leaf clover and we decided on the spot to arrange an afternoon tea at his parents’ home.

“By the way, just curious,” I asked casually, “What’s your dad’s... um... profession?”

“He builds houses. Why?”

“Oh, no reason. Like I said, just curious.”

I decided not to ask for any additional details about his family

business, even if I had to invent some for my father's peace of mind—which I did.



Driving with my family to Ellis' house, I began to feel jittery, second-guessing myself about this decision. Other than the sound of my voice quietly giving directions, it was silent in the car until we drove up Alta Drive to our destination.

"This is the street, just two blocks up on the right—712," I instructed.

"Wow!" Nan shouted out. "This looks like something out of a Grace Kelly movie!"

"Yeh, nice," my father commented under his breath.

"Honey, Beverly Hills is the most beautiful neighborhood I could ever imagine," Mom said. "I can't wait to see their home."

Our family was given a lively tour of Ellis' house, which was sprawling, but unpretentious. With a warm, sunny August sky above, the vast lawn, the swimming pool, and spectacular flowerbeds were vibrant with color. Topping off the magical property were the outdoor cabanas complete with a full kitchen and three changing rooms. It was a world apart from even the most illustrious homes in the suburbs where we lived in Philadelphia.

The interior of the house was decorated with glamorous Venetian mirrors and marble fireplaces, a grandfather clock with intricate hand painting on the dials, and colorful porcelain statues made into lamp bases. Ellis' mother, Juliette, even had her own sewing room upstairs with a collection of upright spools of thread in a medley of colors mounted to the wall. Their life had nothing to do with mine. There's no conceivable way to tell you the loveliness of it.

A uniformed maid clutching the bone handles of a huge silver tray moved steadily toward the round mahogany table just off the center-hall where we were all seated in dark wood, ladder-back chairs. The

weight of the gleaming tea service appeared to defy gravity and I was fearful that she would not make it to the table with her heavy burden. I imagined the whole set along with its poor bearer careening loudly to the highly polished hardwood floor, spilling a sea of tea and milk and assorted desserts on the silky rug beneath us. But thankfully, the maid was clearly accomplished, tipping not so much as a droplet. Catching Nan's eye, it was apparent that my sister and I were on the same wavelength, but unlike me, she couldn't contain herself.

"Phew, I've been holding my breath thinking you wouldn't make it!" Nan remarked lightly, breaking the ice and provoking laughter all around.

Juliette poured deftly from the steaming teapot, the matching ornate components superbly arranged on the oval tray. Individual teacakes were served along with an entire lemon cake that had been baked in a fluted pan and inverted to resemble a glazed, sculpted crown. Juliette began to slice the cake, which was embellished by huge, colorful roses I recognized from the grounds.

"Dale, dear, have a piece of this delicious lemon cake, won't you? Certainly, you needn't worry about your lovely figure," Juliette said, smiling sweetly at me.

"Oh, no. Thank you."

"Are you sure I can't tempt you? My sister, Grace, made it just this morning especially for us." With a devilish grin on her face, she confided, "Her recipe is a big family secret."

Later on, I discovered that Juliette's sister was *the* Grace of "Miss Grace Lemon Cake," who turned her home-style recipe into a nationwide, lucrative business that still thrives today as part of the well-known Mrs. Beasley's, a national bakery franchise.

Struck by an attack of nerves, I don't really remember how I responded to Ellis' mother, or even if I said or ate anything at all. But, as much as I had worried about this encounter, it was turning out to be a fanciful afternoon with our parents socializing comfortably and our hosts, warm and amiable.

When it was time to leave, Ellis, Juliette, and Ellis' dad, Dave, along with George, the family dog—walked us past the front door. Juliette wrapped her arm around my waist as we were departing.

“Rae, Ben, Nan... and Dale, of course, it was such a pleasure getting to know you. Dave and I look forward to seeing you all again in the not too distant future.”

“Thank you for such a lovely afternoon.” Mom replied.

Out of the corner of my eye, I witnessed an exchange of hugs and fleeting air kisses as everyone said their goodbyes. Juliette and my mom even shared a little wink that they believed I hadn't noticed.

“We had a great time. These two kids sure look terrific together!” my father said heartily as he openly scanned the faces of Ellis' parents.

Everyone smiled and nodded their heads tactfully while I turned as deep a red as the scarlet roses lining the walkway. Hoping my father would not embarrass me at an event like this was futile, like telling water not to be wet.

“Thanks for everything,” he added, half-laughing.

“Juliette and Dave, you must come visit us in Philadelphia. We have plenty of room,” Mom added politely. I was mortified, beginning to separate myself from the group, pretending I hadn't heard this overly familiar invitation.

But Juliette's response came swiftly. “What a lovely idea, Rae dear.” It was obvious that both sets of parents had died and gone to heaven.

Having met Ellis' parents briefly that one time before, I now understood that Juliette, especially, seemed to belong to another era, perhaps coming from people of royal blood. Her ambiance was decidedly uncommon—formal, but gracious and tactful. She was a short, pear-shaped woman wearing a lace dress in the middle of the afternoon that was impeccably fitted to her unconventional figure. (Later, I discovered a seamstress made her clothing on a mannequin of her body, which accounted for everything fitting like a wet cloth to cement.) With wavy, pale blond hair fashioned loosely into a French-twist and a beguiling face with blue twinkling eyes, I was so taken

with her profusion of grace. My family wasn't like Ellis' family, but it sure was the way I would have liked it to be.



I ached for Ellis throughout my last semester of high school in Philadelphia. From the end of that third and final summer at the Beverly Hilton Hotel onward, it seemed that I lived my life waiting at the mailbox in anticipation of letters and gifts that flew between Ellis and me and between Ellis' parents and my parents. I reread every single letter until it practically disintegrated in my hands and Ellis' desire for me almost leaped off the pages, exciting me in a way I had never experienced before.

We courted through these letters and I soon found that my life was terribly gloomy without him. For one thing, food had no flavor—not even the creamy chocolate Tasty Cakes I had grown up on. When there were rainy days, I felt especially blue and teary, longing for Los Angeles, which I imagined was always bathed in sunlight. I remembered all those magical kisses Ellis and I had exchanged and wanted more of them. Enough to last forever.

We hardly spoke by phone; long-distance calls were rare then due to the cost being so prohibitive. It was unbelievably exhilarating when I did receive the very occasional phone call from my Prince Charming, who lived in a castle on the West Coast, or as my father took to calling it, the “Best Coast.”

Seven months into our long-distance courtship, my father asked, “So, has he mentioned marriage yet?”

“I'm way too young to get married, Dad. I miss Ellis, but we live on opposite sides of the country.” I was careful with my reply, as it was a subject that turned him ballistic.

“What was that? Why do you always talk to me in a whisper? I didn't hear one damn word you said.” Dad was acutely hard of hearing, but his ego would not concede to any sort of hearing device.

Instead he unloaded his handicap on our family. We had to raise our voices and do all the work to accommodate his personal shortcoming. I loudly repeated my statement and watched his face turn rigid.

“Look,” he said. “I have this dream. You’re not going to allow me to lose it.”

My father was obsessed. Truthfully, I had a similar dream, but I desperately wanted it to be my own.

“We already went over the Los Angeles thing. You’ll move there. Period! Eventually, we will too. It’s settled,” he stated in an exasperated voice that brooked argument.

I *knew* it! He and Mom did want to live in L.A. as I always suspected. In order not to inflame tensions further, however, I did what I usually did and suppressed my comeback, not wanting to say anything I would have to unsay later.



An inveterate gambler, Dad’s free time was spent in the casinos of Las Vegas during the early years when legendary hotels vied with one another to lure high-stakes gamblers to their tables. They routinely sent charter flights for my father, plucking him from his family and the evidently boring city of Philadelphia. A few days later, we’d reclaim his body at the private airport that catered to such excessive behavior.

The Sands Hotel, Desert Inn, and later, Caesar’s Palace, put him up free of charge in opulent suites with every imaginable amenity. These were the hotels where the celebrated names of the Rat Pack—Frank, Dino and Sammy—regularly graced the psychedelic marquees, the ones that lit up the desert sky. The strategy for the hotels to build loyalty with high rollers was based on the common knowledge that every gambler eventually loses. Dad would return to our lovely New England-style home—silent and morose if he lost, arrogant and self-aggrandizing if he won.

On several occasions, he took Mom, my sister, and me along on his

gambling trips. (His son, Donnie, was still too young to participate.) We were treated like royalty and I was mesmerized by the glamour of those early Vegas years. We weren't old enough to step foot in the casinos for a long time, but as soon as we turned about thirteen and fifteen and were stylish enough to be mistaken for late teenagers, we would sneak in.

I was often the one who would meander quietly over to the crap table where my father was busy shooting dice, which was his game of choice along with some blackjack and baccarat. I stood a little distance away from him thinking he wouldn't notice me. But, the action soared when a fat, sleazy man smoking a cigar successfully threw the dice for thirty minutes and everyone curled their torsos way over the crap table edge. At one point, I looked up as everyone was looking down at the dice and I found myself eye-to-eye with plunging cleavage and several pairs of cantaloupe-sized breasts.

Stern, determined, and tired-looking at the tables, Dad always seemed to be muttering something distasteful under his breath. The croupiers continually gave him large stacks of chips and pushed little notes toward him to sign. Ignorant about such markers and notes, it was always curious to me that he could have all the chips he desired. I believed these dealers must really like my father. In reality, he was just good for business, so they extended high table limits like tens of thousands of dollars on his signature alone and the markers acted like his own personal checks.

Little did we know that Las Vegas would play a far bigger role in our family dynamics. In the end, this was the city my parents chose to make their permanent residence. Jerry, my brother-in-law, the same man who Dad had despised since the early days when he ran a hoagie stand, proved my father wrong when he founded and developed a publicly traded business. An auspicious IPO investment in Jerry's technology company enabled Dad to retire prematurely. After a series of moves from Philadelphia to Fort Lauderdale to Los Angeles, my parents ultimately settled down in Las Vegas to live out

their lives. I thought at the time that my father seemed synonymous with Sin City. Little did I know this was the very place, almost three years later, where my first husband would propose marriage.



I was invited to join Ellis and his family in Las Vegas during the following Easter vacation. Everyone we knew on both coasts had already considered us a couple. We gambled a little and were treated to various live musical extravaganzas like the Follies Berjère.

By this time, I knew all about baccarat, blackjack, and craps, but didn't let on, fearful that Ellis and his family might think less of me. Actually, I had developed a genetic fondness for gambling. The dealers had quietly started to let my sister and me play as long as we were in the vicinity of my father. It wasn't difficult to get hooked on the adrenaline rush of a winning streak at the tables.

Ellis' family stayed in a Caesar's Palace suite consisting of a large parlor-type lounge with three satellite bedrooms: Juliette and Dave occupied one, Ellis and his brother, Dick, in another, and his sister, Marlene, and I shared the third bedroom.

One evening, reservations were made at one of the most elegant restaurants in town and we decided to dress up fancy for dinner. Ready early, I left Marlene to primp in our room and made my way to the lounge area where Ellis was seated in one of the armchairs reading a magazine. I lowered myself into the facing chair.

"Hi," I said. "Where's everybody? Won't we be late?"

Without a word, he got up from his chair, stood right in front of me and suddenly smiling, he dropped to the floor on one knee.

"Dale, will you marry me?"

At first, I was sure he was just goofing around. But, looking into his pleading eyes, I realized this was no joke despite the fact that I was completely unprepared to be asked that question at age seventeen. I did know this was where we were headed someday, but I

felt I couldn't turn him down with a vague "sure, someday," so after a few loud heartbeats, I responded enthusiastically, hoping I hadn't hesitated too long.

"Yes, Ellis. I will."

He rose from the floor and reached behind the television set to retrieve a red-leather ring box he had hidden there. I immediately unsnapped it to find a large, pear-shaped diamond ring that fit perfectly when I slipped it on my finger.

"It's just gorgeous—really gorgeous! Geez. Thank you, Ellis." I kissed him, and then, we kind of kissed each other. I honestly felt a little removed from the scene, still recovering from what had just occurred. In an unexpected burst of enthusiasm, the rest of the family barged into the living room from all directions, surrounding us and calling out their best wishes.

"Congratulations!" they shouted in unison.

I then realized that the proposal had been choreographed which, of course, was the reason they had all lagged behind. Apparently, I was the last to know I was getting engaged that evening.

As we left the suite for our dinner reservation and walked through the casino, I caught a glimpse of the diamond sparkling atop my finger. It suddenly dawned on me that I had sealed my commitment to Ellis and my future against the background racket from droves of slot machines and all the nameless croupiers pitching chips around the casino crap tables.

After dinner, I called my parents with the news, while Ellis and his family grabbed for the phone, everyone talking over everyone else. The imaginary wedding bells that had been ringing in my parents' heads for months were finally clanging at the news of our engagement.

Excited at the anticipation of a joint family celebration, my parents caught a red-eye to Las Vegas. The next morning when I awakened, the two sets of parents were eating pastries and sipping coffee in the living room of our suite. As I began to enter the room, I overheard

my mom conversing with Juliette.

“And, when she was young, all the mothers said to their daughters, ‘Why can’t you be more like that Dale Benjamin girl?’” And then, she chuckled.

I pretended that I hadn’t overheard her gloating, thinking to myself, ‘You don’t have to win them over anymore, Mom. It’s a done deal!’

The four parents seemed to instantly gravitate to each other, exchanging little jokes and relaxing into one another’s strange arms that by virtue of our engagement weren’t strange anymore. Mom’s face was glazed in tears when she saw me. “Oh, my baby...” her expression said.

The trick to fitting into this scene was to become someone else completely, which, thank God, was what my father did remarkably well. No one had ever told amusing stories in my family, despite the Southern tradition of spinning all kinds of yarns. Out of nowhere, he was telling long-winded jokes that had Ellis’ family doubling over with laughter. They all walked about arm-in-arm—their collective happiness beaming from their faces. It seemed that instantly, my engagement ring had some kind of magical power to merge us into one big family.

Was I happy about all this? The honest answer is that I wasn’t at all certain. I do know that my hands were perspiring because I was nervous and trying terribly hard to conform to what was expected of me. My father had said a while back, “Ellis is the best hope we have”—whatever that meant.

All the exhilaration expressed that evening also signaled that this match was a very good thing, but I must admit to privately being a bit hysterical at the idea that two entire families might self-destruct had I tried to stop the runaway matrimonial train. I just couldn’t see myself plucking up the courage to express my concerns to anyone—the natural concerns I had about marrying so young, moving far away, missing my mom, sister, and brother and all of my friends.



When we returned home to Philadelphia, I slipped into my brother's bedroom to bring him up to speed. Donnie, who was short of fifteen at the time and for the most part detached from all the engagement activities, raised my ring finger to his right eye for a close inspection before jerking his head back as though the glint was blinding him.

"Oh stop it, silly!" I said.

"N-i-c-e piece of ice. I could trade it for a DiMaggio rookie card." Donnie could not only name the players on all the baseball teams, he could recite their batting averages as well.

"Go ahead, dear brother—get it out of your system."

"So, have you done it yet?"

"Don't be disgusting, Donnie."

"Does Ellis know any nice girls for me?"

I started to laugh but soon realized he was dead serious. "I need you here to protect me. That's what big sisters are for."

The tone of our conversation grew somber as the smoke from my cigarette floated around his face saddling me with the guilt of an imposter. "Why do you have to move so far away?" he then asked innocently.

"Because Ellis and I are getting married, Donnie, and that's where he lives. After the wedding, you'll come visit us whenever you want." I knew I'd miss my baby brother terribly. When I opened my arms to embrace him, he took a step backward.

"I just don't want to be stuck here alone with Dad, that's all."

Over the years, watching helpless and silent as my father ignored or berated my brother, I had been unable to help him with his situation except by being as doting and supportive a sister as possible. But, I had finally reached the point where I was ready to marry Ellis, hoping that I was not simply fulfilling my parents' expectations of me. I had begun to appreciate my own good fortune. After all, I was about to "marry well," as my father phrased it.

“Why doesn’t he move to where *we* all live? Here in Philadelphia?” Donnie asked.

“Because that’s not how it works, little brother.” I was suddenly unsure about why it had to work that way.



It was unusually pleasant at our house following my marriage proposal and acceptance. Everyone on Meeting House Lane was in ecstatic wedding mode. My parents impressed their friends by wildly exaggerating every aspect of Ellis’ life—the size of his home in Beverly Hills, the gilt furnishings, and Juliette’s jewelry. Mom’s most favorite bragging right was the dressmaker who came to their house to design all of my future mother-in-law’s wardrobe.

Now that we were properly engaged, Ellis’ parents invited me to spend several weeks that upcoming summer at their home. I was completely enticed by the effervescent allure of their world and could hardly wait.

“We can all get to know each other better and you’ll stay in Marlene’s room. She’s very excited to have you, dear,” Juliette said.

Toward the middle of that summer, Ellis’ parents hosted a gala engagement party at their Beverly Hills estate for about one hundred family friends and my entire family from Philadelphia. Even Donnie was included! It was held in the backyard, which they called “the garden.”

Although it wasn’t mentioned, I instinctively knew this celebration was my unofficial society debut and I dressed accordingly in a billowing, pale blue organza dress with high heeled pumps dyed to match. My mother and father continued to be delighted with their future son-in-law and his family—the type of folks who were pillars of the community and used finger bowls at their dinner table.

By this time, I had become overwhelmed with excitement. The world seemed so fresh and new; I had boarded a wedding carousel

that whipped me about at a dizzying pace. My own teenaged identity was so unformed that truthfully, I was naively eager to become someone else's "someone."

One day during that summer in Los Angeles, Ellis drove me around the city. We ate lunch at Clifton's while he counseled me about this spot being a city trademark, the oldest cafeteria-style restaurant in all of Los Angeles. It brought to my mind the many times our family frequented "Horn & Hardarts" both in Philadelphia and New York, the automat I recalled so fondly, one soon to go missing from my geographic landscape. We each used to take a tray, slide it down stainless steel rails and select our food along the beltway by putting coins in little slots in exchange for a crock of baked beans or a sandwich auditioning behind little glass cubicles.

Ellis introduced me to many other interesting sites this same day, including some of the apartment buildings built and owned by his family's construction business. Breaking the silence as we drove in the car, I brought up some subjects that were on my mind.

"I was thinking I'll switch from Penn to UCLA when I move here after the wedding. I was accepted for either first or second semester and I hear they have a great journalism department."

"What would you do with that kind of degree?"

"Ellis, you know I love to write. You even said you like my writing."

"I can't imagine what you would do with it, is all."

He parked the car in an unsavory neighborhood, and indicated that I should get out. I stepped from the car and my eyes caught sight of some old, frightful buildings. Ellis was busy getting something from the trunk, so I wiped away my facial expression of mock-delight. He removed his camera and I was still stinging from our journalism discussion as I followed him toward an enormous housing development.

"Stand over there, in front of the gate," he signaled with the wave of his hand. "That's the Crenshaw project we built a long time ago." Gesturing at an amalgamation of dreary-looking apartment build-

ings, I didn't see a gate, but walked out ahead slowly, assuming he would direct me further.

"Stop there! Turn around slowly to me. Lean your head slightly to the right, toward your shoulder." He paused and raised the Leica to his eye. "Okay, now smile." I thought it odd that he was so fastidious about such an ordinary photograph, but little did I know at this particular moment in time the astonishing relationship of Ellis and his camera.

We were driving back home and after a few quiet moments, I asked, "Where do you think we'll live—I mean after we're married?" I was curious ever since we had become engaged and set a wedding date. Los Angeles was such a sprawling city, so unlike my tidy little suburb where I was familiar with every side street and pothole.

"I haven't a clue." He said it so quickly, it sounded like one word—*Ihaventaclue*. I felt like he was heckling me a bit. Certainly, I was having a hard time engaging him in conversation and was especially surprised that he didn't seem interested in issues I considered important.

"Were you planning on us living with your family at first?"

"We'll see."

My body suddenly stiffened like a wound coil. It was only then that I realized Ellis was not only soft-spoken, he didn't seem to talk much at all. It was something I hadn't noticed until this very afternoon. In reality, we were hardly ever alone and his gregarious family members had always engaged each other and me in such intriguing topics. I became certain this must only be a little hiccup in the premarital jitters, but it got me all mixed up inside.

The matter passed and my bride's imagination took over as I fixated on what to wear as I swept down the aisle. Nan had married Jerry the year before, despite my parents' immense disapproval.

"Any attack on Jerry is an attack on me and that's a fight you're going to lose," Nan had bravely stood up and said to my father. Somehow it all worked out and I tremendously admired her courage.

My sister's gorgeous gown and headdress were practically new.

"Mom, why don't I wear Nan's wedding gown?" I anticipated the question might ignite some hefty emotion and I was right.

"Honey, how can I convince you to stop being so logical?"

"Do you think she'd mind?"

"Of course she wouldn't mind, but every young bride should have her own beautiful and unique wedding dress." She gave me an eager hug. "We'll start looking right away."

The thought of my wearing a "hand-me-down" was preposterous at first, but eventually, when dozens of dresses I tried on didn't suit me for one reason or another, I wore Mom down and ultimately got married in my sister's gown. It was a size 8 downsized to a size 2, and fit me as though the alterations had been made on one of those body mannequins like Juliette's. With a palpable sense of joy, I rode the emotional waves of my parents' dream. Before I was of legal age to consume an alcoholic cocktail or vote in a presidential election, I was making a decision meant to last a lifetime.



I never had the proverbial "facts of life" discussion from either parent, but something unexpected did happen to me when I was only eleven years old. On a cold early morning, I screamed in terror for my mother from the toilet seat as droplets of blood turned the bowl water bright red.

"Mommy! Mommy, come quick! Mommy!" My shrill voice nearly scared her to death. She raced into the bathroom and I lifted my bottom up a bit pointing to the blood in the toilet. The next thing I knew, she slapped me hard across my face! Not only did it hurt, I was stupefied. She had never hit me before.

I cried as I tearfully shouted out, "Why did you do that to me?"

She crouched down and hugged me close to her chest, kissing me on the cheek she had just slapped, saying proudly, "Congratulations,

sweetheart. Today, you are a woman!”

I couldn't have been more confused about this aggressive rite of passage. My face still smarted and I inquired in a world of bewilderment: “So that's why you hit me?”

“Oh baby, it's just what Jewish mothers do when their daughters get their period. My mother did it to me and her mother did it to her. It's tradition—for good luck! To be sure the young girl has a happy, healthy, adult life.”

“It sure is strange,” I said, trying to get over the shock.

A woman never forgets the moment she gets her first period, although much later, my mother's family tradition ended when my own daughter found herself becoming a woman.



The next portion of my sex education came at age fourteen, when I was seated next to my father on the sofa watching TV in our den.

“Don't touch a man here,” he stated surprisingly, slapping his thigh lightly with the flat of his hand.

“Okay,” I muttered, not having a clue why he had brought up the subject until my sister later explained to me that this action—as she phrased it—might cause “accidental arousal.”

“Ohhhh.” Truthfully, I didn't understand even a tad of it.

“And...” Nan launched into more information than I wanted to know. “When you're kissing boys *seriously*, you both open your mouths and twist your tongues around inside.”

“Tongues? That is just plain sickening!”

“Never mind, Dale. When you're ready to grow up, I'll explain.” She sounded a little annoyed with me.

Dad offered me another tip a year or so later when I had begun to understand a little more about these things. “Girls must *save* themselves for marriage. You know what I mean, right?” He said this as though a woman's virginity were her greatest asset. I shook my head

affirmatively.

Not much later, Ellis, too, informed me that “sexual relations” were to be avoided until after our wedding in Philadelphia some eight months later. “So, you shouldn’t see it ‘til then. Some things—things like this—should wait. The first time will be on our wedding night.”

It could be that my father and Ellis were collaborators highlighting the era’s stifling restrictions. In any case—believe me, I was in no rush.



My memory is unmistakably clear. It happened in our new house—the one we bought in Lower Merion some years after moving up from the South. I had walked unannounced into my parents’ bedroom. Mom and Dad were smoking while reclining on their bed reading the newspaper. Closest to the door, my father, clad only in loose boxer shorts, had his right leg straight out and the other bent at the knee, his foot flat on the bedspread. He was blithely unaware that I was transfixed, let alone that his penis and scrotum were exposed in the ample fullness of the boxer leg; that his flaccid maleness poured out. To me it was a jumbled mass of what appeared to be raw meat or, worse yet, the scramble of his intestinal tract. I’d never before seen such a sight and vividly recall it being disgustingly alien. I wasn’t so young—perhaps twelve—but I couldn’t shake the visual for years to come. This was my introduction to the male reproductive organ and it made me queasy. Exceedingly queasy.

I recall Dad looking up from his reading. “Do you want something, Dale?” My heart pounded hard as a hammer and only a few words managed to trip from my mouth, the only part of me that didn’t feel paralyzed.

“No, Daddy. Just came in to say hello... Hello!” And I took off like a missile.



Hot necking sessions with Ellis provided me with utter enjoyment and thoroughly satisfied what I assumed was my entire sexual puzzle. At this stage of my life, the lack of intercourse did not at all seem like a missing piece. It was, in fact, something I grew to dread.

On one occasion, while making out with Ellis, I felt something I'd describe as pleasurable and unexpected when I first experienced the magic surge that produced a sort of rhythmic tingling and pulsing sensation building down there. The area between my legs seemed to disassemble and then reassemble again as the feeling slowly dissipated. I was dying to discuss this startling effect that caused my body to quiver, but it was too soon for my coterie of innocent high school girlfriends to know about such things. In truth, I was even too embarrassed to tell my sister. I had never masturbated or even heard of it, so I was sorely lacking in any facts or details about sexual responses.

Fall was approaching fast, bringing with it crisp air and countless reminders of what I loved about Philadelphia. I had heard there was no such thing as "seasons" in Southern California and I couldn't imagine not experiencing the changing of the leaves during my most favorite months of the year. The short time Ellis and I were together before the November wedding, our social calendar was filled with celebratory functions, but I took time out to introduce him to my city's colorful autumn glory.

One week before my wedding, however, I began obsessing about physically consummating our marital vows. This foreboding had grown to the point of abject terror. The very night before the wedding, I prayed to the Sex Gods to proffer my "monthly" way early to provide a suitable excuse for the occasion. The gods must have heard me, as sure enough at sunrise of my actual wedding day, I awakened atop a small bloody puddle. I wouldn't even have to go to third base.



Lester Lanin provided swing music for the 250 guests at our wedding, sort of a crowded hug-filled, extravagant fairy-tale on a chilly November 14th. Ellis' family and their close friends jetted in from California and the floor was packed with everybody singing along to familiar tunes and sing-along lyrics. The twenty or so invitees from Los Angeles melded beautifully with the hometown guests. People who normally don't dance were dancing nonetheless, or at least swinging their hips. I was chatting with one of my uncles when Ellis' mother came over, swaying a little like she was still on the dance floor.

"My darling new daughter..." Juliette kissed me gently on both of my cheeks. "Honey, we are honored that Ellis has married such an exceptional young woman. I just want to assure you that I will do everything in my power to make you feel at home with us."

"Oh, don't worry. I'll be fine in Los Angeles. Really."

"Well dear, now that we're officially family, Dave and I would love you to call us 'Mom' and 'Dad,' but only if you're completely comfortable with it." She pulled me closer to her. "Maybe you'd like to consult with your parents?"

On this particular, invigorating Saturday evening, I had declared my marriage vows and become unshackled to my parents. "Oh that's not necessary. I'd be thrilled to call you Mom and Dad."

Embracing me enthusiastically, I sensed that nothing could have pleased Juliette more. I, in turn, was mad for my new, vivacious mother-in-law. I would have followed her anywhere, and in a sense, that's exactly what I did.

"Oh, honey," she said grinning ear to ear. "We're all going to be so happy!"

"I know we will, *Mom.*"



“Oh my God... D-a-l-e. You. Are. Stunning. You look like a grown-up woman!” It was Sandy, one of my bridesmaids and closest friends, commenting on my going-away ensemble. We giggled for a while and then I felt my face turn serious.

“Sandy, I need you to help me be strong. I’ll miss you all so much.”

Every one of my friends admired my easygoing ability to fly off to a whole new life without anything but my clothes and my husband in tow. Before Sandy could respond, we were swarmed with other guests. I had only just changed from my gown into a suit of mustard wool and black peau de soie with a coordinating felt fedora that was the fashion-forward statement of the time. I was ready to embark on what I wholly believed would be my excellent marital adventure.

Ellis and I weren’t aware of the misting rain until we left the wedding venue in our street clothes and hustled into the waiting town car. Masses of guests followed us outside for a final wave and I opened the passenger window to motion back at them. There was suddenly a torrential downpour and I closed the car window just enough so as not to insult anyone. But before I knew it, Ellis was at my car door with his head drenched, motioning for me to unlock it. I was stunned at his unsympathetic request for me to join him out of the car without an umbrella just so our wedding photographer could get a carefully choreographed departure shot. The rain came pelting down sideways on me, but I slapped on a smile for the camera.

I recognized Nan’s voice as she shouted, “Rainy day weddings are good luck,” from the rain-soaked crowd.

Back in the car, wet and gloomy, I pressed my embroidered lace wedding handkerchief against my clothes in an effort to blot some of the rainwater as we drove on the I-95 to Manhattan and the Pierre Hotel.

My mood lifted considerably when Ellis signed us in at the hotel desk as “Mr. and Mrs.” and I remained upbeat after we entered the luxurious bridal suite. The floor butler indicated a bouquet of long-stemmed red roses that Ellis had arranged to be placed in the suite

upon our arrival.

Peeling off my damp clothing, I nervously unpacked in the private dressing room, removing my powder blue Lucie Ann nightgown and matching peignoir from the suitcase. My mother, the expert seamstress, aware of my self-consciousness over my small breasts, had sewn little soft falsies into the upper gown portion. I was touched and grateful for her sweet surprise.

After showering and changing, I shyly presented myself to Ellis who was wearing a grey silk pajama and bathrobe set, the crisp new folds still in place. Without commenting on my wedding night ensemble, he said, "Let's get some pictures of us."

It was the last thing I expected, and the romance of the evening—for me at least—was just about shattered.

My new husband captured a few photo variations of me in front of the elaborate floor to ceiling entry mirror with its gold filigree frame. Cradling the bouquet of red roses in my arms and standing modestly in my new nightgown and peignoir, I was told to pose and to smile. Following my photo session, Ellis asked me to take similar shots of him in the same location. It wasn't at all what I imagined on this particular night.

For several days, we spent our bedtime hours doing exactly what we had been doing prior to our wedding—only now we were more bare. Admittedly, we were also lying prone in a bed instead of a sofa, but the heavy breathing was exactly the same.

On the night before we were to return to L.A., my period ceased and the marital obligation that had for weeks haunted me, suddenly had a face. Inwardly, I was crazed, yet I felt a sense of urgency to get the deed done and over with. Lying in bed cold and shivering from both the air-conditioning and my nerves, Ellis draped a blanket across my twitching knees. The bodice of my nightgown with its cleverly sewn-in falsies was withdrawn and my small breasts lay uncovered.

Ellis lifted the hem of my gown up to my waist and gently hoisted

himself on me; similar to the way a rider might mount a horse. I fully expected that something so doggedly barred was bound to be accompanied by shattered illusions and I'd say that it was—and I'd also say that it hurt pretty bad. On the other hand, getting over the mental block and fear of the marital act seemed somewhat of an achievement. I did wonder how other women found this sort of thing desirable or even arousing as I had heard from girls who read a certain type of explicit romance novel. Surely these women who *enjoyed* sex must either be demented or blessed with a very high pain threshold.

Nan had introduced me to tampons and the accompanying freedom from that elastic belt with those awkward clamps fixing the bulky sanitary pad in place. It changed everything! Mistakenly, I had imagined that the penetration of a man's penis inside of me would be familiar, much like the sensation of inserting my tampon. Boy, was I mistaken.

After a short time, I began to inwardly prepare myself for these undignified sexual encounters with my husband where there was nakedness and touching in formerly forbidden places. I wasn't afraid or shivering anymore, but I disliked it intensely. The repetition began to unnerve me, but mentally I just clicked over like another mile on the odometer. There was the same position, the messiness of it, the highly excitable "Oh... God—Oh... Oh!"—that breathy screeching from Ellis, and the deafening silence from me. I just couldn't latch onto it, not any part of it.

My impressions and insecurities about this particular subject were too private to discuss with anyone and it soon became a tiresome and intrusive pastime with no payoff at all for me. But we were young and in love and I assumed it was what you do when you get married. Your life changes and boils down to what's expected of you versus what you want.

Ultimately, I accepted the sex act along with some other misconceptions I had. There were dozens of hurdles to overcome in a

marriage and I was certain this was just one of them. I promised myself that I would try harder to prevail over my cynicism and search for more harmony. But I would argue that it was a real handicap for me—not knowing through the act of sexual intimacy prior to our marriage, just how little I felt for the man with whom I was legally bound to spend the rest of my life.