

ARC ONLY

Just Who We Are

My Story of Grit, Grace, and Identity

A Memoir by Robyn Stecher

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Also, certain incidents have been reconstructed and dialogue reassembled, based on the Author's journals written during the period this book covers, and on her memory of events. Every effort has been made to be accurate and inclusive of facts. There may be instances where names have been omitted from events with- out intention.

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For my parents Bernie and Barbara

You gave me the gift of knowing
that if I kept searching I would find myself

For Joyce
For reminding me not to be afraid

INTRODUCTION

Life will go on
as long as there is someone to sing, to dance,
to tell stories and to listen.

~Oren Lyons

I stepped into my sixtieth year with a lot of questions. Where am I headed? How well have I lived? Did I do what I wanted to do? Have I gone where I wanted to go? Have I laughed enough? Have I loved with all my heart? Have I given enough? How will my son's life unfold? Am I becoming who I wanted to be?

I started writing about my fears and my fury, my joys and my losses, the ways I was broken and how I became whole. I wrote when I had a few stolen minutes in the morning or very late at night. I wrote on trains and planes, and sometimes in the car. I wrote when I doubted that what I had to say had merit, or that anyone would want to read what I had to say. I wrote until I didn't want to write another word. I'd walk away, and then I'd start again.

Mine are not stories of greatness like landing a plane in the Hudson River and saving everyone on board. I didn't overcome poverty to become a Wall Street mogul. I was raised in a mainstream, middle-class New England town. I wasn't special by way of winning Olympic medals or even being an exceptional student. When I was a teenager, I threatened to drop out of high school. I smoked pot, carried a knife, and hitchhiked. I never won a trophy. I wasn't always very pretty or overly smart. I quit a lot of things, but I came from a family of hard-working people, and somehow the embers of those values were enough to wake me up and ignite my ambition.

Armed with resourcefulness, I was determined to discover my purpose and find success.

My life didn't unfold the way I had imagined. When the unexpected came, stealthy and quiet, how fast it changed me. I might have crumbled, but I rose, demanding, "Show me what is possible."

My life's stories are about grit, grace and identity. My life has been beautiful and messy. I can't iron, fold, or make my stories any neater. I don't want to box them, burn them, bury them, forget them, trade them in, or label them for storage. I don't want to glorify them, either. I lived these stories to share them.

No hero, no one famous, no celebrity has more to share than what they have lived. If we stop telling the full-length versions of our truths, we become islands floating in seas that keep us distant. We are all traveling together, finding out just who we are.

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Just Who We Are

It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.

~Antoine De Saint-Exupery~

“Can we go on this show?” Daniel called out.

I didn’t answer.

“MOM, can we go on this show?”

I was in the bathroom. The door was closed. Leaning into the mir-

ror, I applied my mascara. On the other side of the door, I could hear the TV. Someone was about to win something big. Daniel was in his “game-show” phase, which had followed “The Muppets” phase and the “Presidents” phase. I didn’t feel like answering. I wanted to be in the bathroom alone.

My son was obsessed. It didn’t matter what show it was; he just wanted to be on a game show.

My parents, Bernie and Barbara, were ignoring him, too. I could hear my mother: “Bernie, where did I leave my pills?”

Barbara would keep asking, and Bernie wouldn’t know. Daniel was 13. He was banging on the bathroom door. I didn’t open it. I would stay in front of that mirror until he stopped.

We were in an unremarkable hotel room in Burlington, Vermont. We were there to pick up my niece Ashley, who was also 13, from circus camp. Afterward, we were all leaving for my parents’ home on Cape Cod.

I was 47. There in the mirror, in the corners of my eyes, was the truth about the laughing and the crying, which came in equal amounts along the way. I liked those lines. They curled upwards and said something about my life.

Memories kept coming at me like water through a broken pipe.

I could see that smile I’d worn as I licked ice cream off my chin during those Cape Cod summers, long before Amy died when we were still a family of five. We would turn cartwheels on the grass and stand on our hands trying to outdo each other.

In the mirror, tears like black rain began to fall. I could feel my sister’s fingers, wrapped in mine, when she was 34 and dying, with my soul crying out beneath the tyranny of the loss. My sister was gone, my marriage was over, and I was a single mother. My son, Daniel, had been born with a genetic anomaly. I wasn’t a suburban mom as my mother had been, with a house to care for, three typical children, suppers to cook each night, and carpools to drive. I was minus a few kids and a husband, and more than one car.

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I had carved my identity from New York City in places too small for large dogs and where the concrete heats up in the summer like a clay oven and bakes you.

My college boyfriend had brought me to New York in 1977. Below the ornate ceiling of the Shubert Theater, I'd sat on a red velvet seat. The story of nineteen chorus dancers began an era for one of the longest-running shows on Broadway, and I'd memorized every word to every song in "A Chorus Line." That had been the beginning of my affair with the city I would live in, love, and sometimes hate; it was a city that asked no forgiveness for the edgy flaws that, for me, didn't diminish her beauty.

My story wasn't like those of my friends from where I'd grown up in a suburb of Boston.

Now, I'd been divorced for seven years. My choice. Still, I wished Daniel's father and I could have saved the unfinished story we'd started. I missed the early years when we had a hammock in the living room and my garden on the rooftop, and we hung out with artists and relished scuba diving. I missed the romance of our beginning. I wished we could have shared the joy of parenting our son and that it would have been enough to save us.

On the day I left my marital home, it was raining. Everything I owned was packed into the 28 boxes that were loaded onto a moving truck. I closed the door to our once home behind me, locking out a decade of my life.

Being unmarried then, I'd thought things would get easier, but now, standing there in that bathroom in Burlington, Vermont, I saw the years covered in a veil of grief.

I listened to my parents in the other room going back and forth about misplaced eyeglasses and what we were going to eat for dinner. Soon, they would celebrate their wedding anniversary. I would never be married for fifty years. I wondered if I'd even remarry.

I remembered my father's voice from when I'd been young, coaching me as he'd run alongside my wobbly, new red bike—he must have been in his early thirties at the time. It had felt awkward at first, being so out of control, but after a while, my feet had stopped fighting. I trusted my arms would steer me. I just kept pedaling, and then I found myself flying along.

Chiseled from the bedrock of my careful traveling, there was my five-year-old faith. I wiped my nose with the back of my hand and splashed water on my face.

"MOOOOOOMMMMMMM!" Daniel was calling.

I had to leave the bathroom.

I stepped out of the past and kneeled. I took Daniel's hand in mine.

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"I love you," I whispered. He let me hold him in my arms for a second. I sat on the edge of the bed. I ran my fingers through his hair.

My beautiful, complex son.

"I really want to go on this show," he said.

"Don't you want to go to the pool?" He couldn't swim. I hated the smell of chlorine and the noise of other families.

"No," he answered.

Neither did I. We weren't like other families anyway. No, we weren't going to the pool.

It's just who we were.

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BERNIE AND BARBARA

Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be...

~Robert Browning~

“Are you sure this is the road?”

My mother was in the driver’s seat. My father was navigating. “Yes, Barb, this is the road.”

“I don’t know... I don’t remember this road.”

“Well, this the only road, and this *is* the road.”

My mother couldn’t remember the route they had taken two days before on their journey northward from Massachusetts to Vermont. “Let’s stop for those muffins. We had the best muffins. Where was it? Bern?”

“I don’t remember. We stopped a few times.”

Bernie and Barbara met on a blind date in 1955. It was two weeks after my mother had been told by a tea leaf reader that she would fall in love and marry a redhead. Bernie was the redhead. He proposed to her on the back of a Howard Johnson’s postcard. They were married within the year. She was 22, and he was 25.

I can’t remember exactly when we started calling them Bernie and Barbara, but I think it was when Ashley referred to them as “Grandma B” and “Papa B.” After that, they became “B and B,” and their shared initials further consecrated the fact that they were in- separable. Their “card-sending generation” acknowledged every single friend’s birthday and anniversary, and they always signed cards ‘Bernie and Barbara.’ They were apart only when Barbara gave birth to us, her three children. No one who knew them thought of one without the other.

At 72 and 74, they were king and queen of the road. The beginnings of Barbara’s failing memory and Bernie’s failing vision and hearing impairment seemed hazardous, but their independence, at all costs, had to remain unchallenged. They were still going places. This was good. As far back as I could remember, they’d made road trips. They

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had driven through most of the U.S. together. Without their car, my parents would have had no life.

I was five when we all went to a guy's house to check out Barbara's first car. That was when Bernie and Barbara couldn't afford more than a used, old clunker. Barbara's smiling face lit up like when we got a toy we really wanted. She would no longer be stuck at home with three children under the age of five. She took us to the town beach, Shopper's World (the mall), the kosher butcher's, and on other errands she needed to do. We visited her good friends from high school and college and played with their children.

On the ride back from Vermont to Cape Cod, I was forbidden from driving. For reasons I'll never know, Bernie or Barbara always drove. My niece Ashley and Daniel, both 13, were in the back seat. I was wedged back there with them, headphones securely over my ears. I was leaning on the car door. The kids were watching movies on a DVD player. It reminded me of when my sister Amy and my brother Steven were little. I'd be in the back seat of the car thinking my parents' fighting in the car would lead to their divorce. Back then, I would have loved headphones. They just didn't exist.

My mother was at the wheel. For most of the nine-hour drive, she was either gunning it or suddenly braking. When she occasionally forgot an exit, she traversed lanes to correct herself. For me, this was not conducive to even brief periods of dozing off, although the children miraculously slept through the near-misses. When we finally pulled into their driveway, it was an act of divine intervention that we were all still alive. I wanted a glass of wine or a shot of vodka.

Bernie and Barbara rid their home of palatable alcohol when my younger brother Steven was 16 and his car met up with the plate-glass window of a car dealership. The accident nearly killed him. The small amount of liquor still in the house was so old that I wouldn't risk drinking any of it. At midnight, I was wide awake, doing Ashley's camp laundry.

For the next two weeks, our collective eating habits would vary too much for a single, peaceful meal: one vegetarian who ate nothing with a face, one who ate nothing that walked or flew, and one who only drank fruits and vegetables. Ashley had been raised vegan by her California parents.

At 15, I'd declared myself a vegetarian after a summer stock theater experience where our meals resembled dog food. Barbara declared that she was not cooking special meals for me. My independence led me not to fear the kitchen...unless my mother was in it. This was still true. Even now, in Bernie and Barbara's home, I'd be terrified to show off my culinary skills.

In her domain, she controlled what came in and went out. My mother did the shopping because she didn't like when foreign things just "appeared" in the refrigerator. She would ask if we wanted anything from the store, but then she wouldn't remember what we'd asked for or that I hated foods like fat-free ice cream that are meant to contain fat. I drink my coffee with cream or half-and-half. Regular milk doesn't cut it.

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Because we were Jewish, food was important. Growing up, we kept kosher, which meant we couldn't eat pork products or mix milk products with meat. We had many sets of dishes and silverware for meals with meat and other silverware for meals with milk. Barbara grew up a little kosher, but not all the way. When they married, she tolerated keeping a kosher home for Bernie. Bernie was kosher for his mother, my grandma Bessie, because if we weren't kosher, she wouldn't eat in our home. But Barbara loved eating lobster and shrimp, which weren't kosher foods. She taught Bernie about the epicurean delights he'd missed out on like lobster, shrimp, and Chinese food. We ate those foods at home on paper plates as well as pizza and subs (we called them grinders). When I was older, I thought being "paper-plate kosher" was so hypocritical.

Barbara cooked every weeknight. She liked her meat very well-done, but we weren't allowed to say it was burned. My favorite meal was macaroni and cheese from a box, which we very rarely ate. Her menu ideas came from magazines like Good Housekeeping and the little index-card box she kept in the kitchen. She saved recipes from her family and her friends. Friday night was Shabbat, which meant chicken, and then we went to temple. Saturday was date night for Bernie and Barbara, which usually meant pizza for us. Sunday was usually visiting day. We saw relatives or family friends, and we ate Chinese food or Jewish deli food. I loved chopped liver, corned beef, and pastrami on onion rolls. None of which I have had since I was 15.

That summer of 2005, when we were all together, I was 47, a capable executive with beneficiaries, a will, and an investment portfolio; people knew me to be highly responsible. I could do all the laundry, clean, cook, and take care of the children's every need, but I was smart enough to know, in Bernie and Barbara's home, not to answer their phone. Taking a message would result in failure. Long before answering machines, when we'd been very young, we'd been taught proper phone etiquette and how to write down messages. I rarely got it right. Barbara always had so many calls, and now endless appointments: temple, sisterhood, Hadassah, book club, mahjong, and volunteering to drive cancer patients. Before I was old enough to drive and negotiating the use of the cars became the daily fight, the telephone in our home was the most important commodity. Because Barbara talked so much we couldn't share a single phone number, I got my own "princess phone" when I was 13. Her favorite punishment was to remove the phone from my room. It wasn't very effective. I would find the phone, plug it back in, and hide with it under my covers. Bernie was a smart man. He never got involved.

My father was the youngest child of Jewish Ukrainian and Lithuanian immigrants. My grandma Bessie was 12 when she was unexpectedly taken in the night and sent alone on a boat to America. She crossed the ocean, fleeing before the ghettos of Vilna would claim her. She didn't learn to read or write English. Her native language was Yiddish. Widowed at 30, with three young children, she worked fifteen-hour days in a basement for a Jewish caterer.

He was born a year after the Great Crash of '29, and throughout the Depression, the death of his father, and their ensuing poverty, Bernie still wouldn't be deterred from becoming educated. He worked numerous jobs from the time he was nine and on throughout college. Later, he was committed to his long career and taking care of his family. He wasn't extremely wealthy, but he was successful.

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Instead of hearing bedtime stories, I wanted to hear about my parents' young lives. Barbara was an "only" child and admitted she was spoiled. Her father was both indulgent and overprotective. She was never allowed to learn how to ride a bike. Her mother Rose was suddenly taken to the hospital when Barbara was 20 and died unexpectedly the next day. I wondered what it would be like to be spoiled and to be an "only child." It sounded good to me, but I felt sorry for her because her mother had died. I don't think my mother ever got over it. She didn't have her mother to share her wedding day or to know her children. Her cousin told me that Rose, for whom I am named, was kind and a great cook. It took a long time for me to realize how smart Barbara was. She whizzed through crossword puzzles, always beat us at Scrabble, and read two books a week. Later, I noticed she knew most of the answers on Jeopardy. She was a teacher for a short time but had left her job, like so many women of her generation, back when she became pregnant with me. Her father was insistent that no daughter of his was going to have children and work! I think she wanted a career, but felt she had no choice.

Bernie's stories about growing up poor and his many jobs intrigued me. I imagined it was awful. But he didn't describe it that way. He lived in a suburb of Boston in a Jewish ghetto. During regular visits from the welfare people, the family had to prove they were poor. Four of them lived on \$100 a month to cover rent and food. They got public assistance for some basic food and yet he never really thought of himself as being deprived. There was one metal ship in a toy store window that he would longingly look at as he passed by each day, but it was very expensive. His sister, who had a job, would occasionally bring him little soldiers. But the metal ship would never be his.

Occasionally, they would have visits from gangs who came into their neighborhood. His mother wouldn't let him wear jeans or sneakers because "that's how the guys from the gangs dress," and according to her, it was a sign of being lower-class. How much lower-class could they have been? The highlight of his family's week was Saturday when they went to the movies—for a nickel. She insisted he wear ironed knickers and clean shirts. They didn't have money, but they had clean clothes and, even though they stood in bread lines, they always had food. My father, who got his first job at 11, didn't stop working until he was 83.

One day, when he was a teenager working in a dress factory, there were two tasks that needed to be completed before the end of the day. One was to go to the post office and the other was to take some equipment to the basement. His coworker decided that Bernie would go to the post office while he took the equipment to the basement. When my father got back to the factory, police cars and an ambulance were outside. Inside, he learned that the elevator had malfunctioned and that his coworker had plummeted to his death. His boss's wife glared at him and said, "It should have been you." He was only 15.

When we were growing up, we used to go to the beach a lot. I loved it because Bernie, who didn't usually have a lot of time to play with us kids, would take us in the water with our floats, and we would build castles in the sand. Later, his grandchildren Ashley and Daniel would also love going to the beach with "Papa Bernie." He would take them out in the calm water of Cape Cod Bay and play with them or take them out in his little boat on the estuary near where he and Barbara lived.

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When I was in middle school, my mother was usually mad at me. At the beach, I would scope out other families who looked worthy of my running away with them. I imagined my new family. I would be the princess, the youngest, maybe the “surprise” who had come long after older siblings. My adoptive mother would be sweet. She would hold me and stroke me. She would smell like fresh laundry. Nothing would stress her out, and I would make her happy. Nothing sad would happen.

But sad things did happen. When my younger brother Steven was in his late teens and I was in my early 20’s, he was drinking heavily and using drugs. After meeting up with the car dealership window, which nearly cost him his life, he landed in rehab. Soon after Steven got out, someone who knew him was arrested on drug-dealing charges. He plea-bargained for a shorter sentence and ratted out my brother as an accomplice. Bernie appealed to the attorney general. I can’t imagine how he felt, knowing that his son would be going to prison. The mandatory sentence for a drug offense in Massachusetts at that time was ten years—even for a first offense. My father pled with the judge. His son had been through rehab, he was clean, and he had a job. The judge was willing to reduce his sentence to a year in prison and nine years’ probation.

It all came as a shock to me. None of us ever discussed it. Barbara never told anyone about it not even her best friend. At family gatherings, my brother was just missing. Amy and I covered for our mother’s sake. Steven was Barbara’s favorite, or maybe she thought he needed more attention from her. Bernie visited him on most weekends. By then, I was already on my own in New York. I didn’t understand him. How, with all the attention he had received—not to mention the sacrifices my parents had made for all of us to enjoy our many after-school activities and to provide for college educations—could he be so cavalier? It was like he was throwing it all away. I didn’t try to find out what mattered to him. I made a lot of assumptions, and maybe I was wrong...but I did write to him. Later, I found a letter he wrote me from prison. He wrote about his mistakes, how he regretted the lost years, and what he had missed out on in his life. He asked about Daniel and Ashley. I wished I could hug him. But it would be a long time until we’d be able to do that. Later, he told me that “going away” had saved his life.

In my mid-forties, my sister and brother were both missing from my life, but the holes closed a little when I was with Daniel and Ashley. That road trip in 2005, from Burlington, Vermont to Cape Cod, was the last one I took with Bernie and Barbara. That summer was also the last time Ashley, Daniel, and I sat in the backseat of their car and laughed about their quirks and bickering. When August came to an end, Ashley went back to Santa Barbara, where she lived, and Daniel and I went back to New York.

I didn’t know another hole was opening. Soon after that summer, Barbara was diagnosed with mild cognitive impairment. She was in the unlucky ten percent of people her age who would face the beginning of the end of her working memory.

But Bernie, Mr. “King of the Road,” came through. He wouldn’t let those trips end. He took the wheel and made sure they kept going. Barbara hated the mean Cape Cod winters, so he bought a place in Florida, and they drove down there every winter. He would pack up the car to the point where he couldn’t see out the back window, get Barbara and their dog Maggie inside, and off they would go. I used to imagine them

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bickering away on those long road trips; I feared for their safety and wondered if they would get lost, but their connection to each other was inseverable. Eventually, Bernie hired a driver so they could fly down and meet the car in Florida.

After she could no longer drive, Barbara's car sat in retirement collecting pine sap and needles. The idea of my mother giving up driving was tragic. After that, I think her world stopped turning. Bernie kept the car for years, as though by leaving it sitting there, he had not totally removed the freedom she once had. Eventually, he gave it to Steven.

The road trips ended, but at 89 years old, Bernie bought a new car. It is very safe. It keeps him on the right side of the line, and if he's too slow to respond, it brakes for him. It can see around corners and behind him. He drives alone now, and Barbara doesn't leave the house much, but he's still going places.

BOOMER WOMAN

Do not follow where the path may lead.
Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.

~Ralph Waldo Emerson~

My class of beautiful, three- and four-year-old ballerinas wearing red lipstick, in fluffy tutus, twirled to the right. I twirled to the left. When I noticed that I was going the wrong way, the embarrassment wasn't enough to get me in line with them. I just kept dancing. My parents watched all the other little girls floating by, and I was standing with my finger up my nose. I wondered if they were mortified or if they knew I was destined to be different.

I sat at the edge of the sandbox in my short skirt with my naked, goose-pimpley legs while the other children played. I felt cursed that a roguish boy named Brook was going to be my partner at our kindergarten "etiquette luncheon." I was scrappy and not pretty. Did my teacher think I was a tomboy and roguish, too? When we arrived at the restaurant, it was the fanciest place I'd ever seen. There were crystal chandeliers and white linens. It looked like somewhere that princesses met princes, but I didn't feel like a princess and Brooke was no prince. As he pulled out my chair for me (part of the etiquette training), he could barely get it to move along the carpet. By the age of five, I was already honing my skills at helping others achieve their potential. How could I help him? I didn't want us to fail our manners test. I could gently kick him under the table if he wasn't properly executing on the finger bowl or putting the napkin on his lap. I wanted for us to be just as perfect as the prettier girls and less scruffy boys, but I knew we weren't.

When I was eight, my mother and I were late to my piano recital. I was running up the walk to my teacher's home, and I fell. My tights were torn, my knee skinned and bloody. I was a mess; I was mortified. My mother tried to console me, but it was pointless. My piano teacher's living room was full of her students and their mothers. I walked in and tried to pull it together, but I couldn't be comforted. The teacher took me into her den, away from everyone, and sympathetically assured me that it was fine. She would change the order so I could go last. This did not help because the most advanced students were going last. When I sat at the piano, all I could think of was how the boy who had gone before me was much better than me. I started to play but couldn't remember my piece. I fumbled and tried to start from the beginning. It was futile. I stopped. My hands fell limp on the keys.

My teacher ushered me back to the den. I went into the bathroom and stayed there for a long time—crying. After that, I quit the lessons, but I played the piano for fun. Later, I quit flute, French, Spanish, Hebrew, gymnastics, art classes, private school, and dancing. I abandoned anything I wasn't naturally very good at. But years after my divorce, the

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first thing I bought when I had a little money was a piano. It was my emancipation gift to myself, a reminder that I could play for joy because I chose to. I'm not sure now if I was a quitter or if maybe I just moved on from what wasn't working for me.

Early on, I had figured out how to make use of my father's cinematography talent. I enlisted him to get out his 8mm camera and shoot my movies. I cast my brother and sister in my directorial masterpieces, ordering them to "act" more convincingly and demanding "cuts" and breaks in the action when things weren't going my way. I also made good use of his Wollensak reel-to-reel tape recorder. I would wait for him to cue me, and click, the reels started turning. I would squeal happily when I heard the playback and heard my voice narrating my descriptive fairy tales. I was 10 when *Funny Girl* was released. It was my favorite movie. I went digging around in my mother's closet, searching for a gown, a wig, and a fur hat. I came down our front stairway, performing my best Barbra Streisand rendition of "Nicky Arnstein." My parents called me Sarah Bernhardt. She was a famous French actress, "queen of the pose and princess of the gesture."

Most of the time in elementary school when everyone else was quiet, I was daydreaming, scheming, or chattering away. I was sent to the coat closet, sequestered from others in penance for being "bold" enough to depart from the rules. Later, I figured out that I wasn't "bad;" my imagination was just more powerful than whatever the teacher was teaching. According to my mother, I daydreamed too much. She was sure I had ADHD, but no one knew what to call it back then.

My girlfriends and I would lie outside eating the sweet bottoms off the grass. We checked our chins to see if the buttercups reflected yellow, which would mean a boy liked us. Day after day in the heat of summer, I looked up at the sky and thought endlessly about my future husband and the maid I would have. (Having a maid meant I wouldn't have to do the chores my mother asked of me.) My stories included a secret desire for international travel and going places like New York City, which I'd seen in movies. I had a burning sense that, beyond life in our suburban development, there was more.

By the time I was a sophomore in high school, my body was not made for winning medals and trophies. When it came to physical competition, anything below my collarbone still required "lack of co-ordination" forgiveness. When we were being picked to play sports, I would feign illnesses to get a note excusing me from the "lineup". I wasn't worthy of any position on any team.

In the mid-Seventies, kids were dying of drug overdoses. I smoked cigarettes and pot, hitchhiked, carried a knife, and didn't wear a bra. I was in the guidance counselor's office regularly. "What's the problem?" I was asked. "You're so bright, and you aren't doing well in your classes." I had no answers. I was most content when I was hanging out with my friends, writing poetry, learning how to play guitar, and listening to Don McLean, Frank Zappa, and Joni Mitchell. I just wanted to get out of school.

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I suffered the misery of having too little confidence and no outlet for my creativity. I wanted to escape the malls, the druggies, my friends, and even my own ennui. For my junior year, I convinced my parents to send me to a private girls' school for the performing arts. Private school wasn't on my parents' agenda or in their budget, but they saw it as an answer to my anguish. The Tudor buildings and sprawling lawns on campus looked grand. I was accepted. We were reading Chaucer and studying the work of George Eliot. This was very different from the public high school. The standard there was to be no less than exceptional, and this was much more than I was willing to give. My grades were average. I argued with my teachers and sought refuge in the drama department.

The drama teacher, Mr. Lindberg, was directing a rarely performed play by A.A. Milne based on the early classic, "The Wind in the Willows." I thought his choice was lame and had no interest in auditioning. My disdain brought an unexpected surprise. He asked me to codirect the play. Finally, I had met an adult who didn't think I was an underachiever. He saw the part of me that shined—my imagination. When the play was over, he gave me a gift. It was a book in which he had inscribed his gratitude to "The Divine Ms. R." He believed I had the ability to lead, even though I had no idea I would lead anyone anywhere that didn't include trouble.

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FINDING KATHY

You said you 'n me was gonna get outta town,
and for once just really let our hair down.
Well, darlin', watch out,'cause my hair is comin' down!

~Thelma and Louise~

Given my less-than-motivated high school academic performance, I went to a marginal college in Connecticut. It was the best school I could get into at the time. I majored in drama, which was appropriate. Being an actress seemed much more interesting than my idea of an office job, where I would have to sit at a desk and type.

I met Kathy in acting class. She sat down next to me. I looked at her and blurted out, "You have the most beautiful eyes!" It was the beginning of our lifelong friendship, and we were a fierce duo. She had long, black curly hair and a fiery Italian personality. She was like Cher, and I was like Bette Midler—only smaller, and I couldn't sing. We figured out that we weren't going to get anywhere as actresses in Connecticut. Together, we plotted to move to New York City. We auditioned for the Stella Adler Conservatory acting school through NYU. We were both accepted. At first, because there was no housing, we were offered rooms in the infamous Chelsea Hotel. When we found out the punk rocker from the Sex Pistols, Sid Vicious, had been murdered there, we had to convince our parents to let us live in an apartment.

It was the spring of 1978, and we had little time before September when school began. Kathy was from Washington Township, New Jersey; I was from Framingham, Massachusetts. Because she lived closer to the city, she had to find us the apartment. Kathy went walking around Greenwich Village near NYU. She noticed a guy hanging out in front of a building on Waverly Place and asked him if there were any available apartments. He just shook his head no. She flashed a hundred-dollar bill and, suddenly, an apartment was "going to be available." The superintendents had to be bribed with "key money" for a tipoff about an empty apartment. This was cheaper than hiring a broker. Money talked.

The apartment was a cockroach-infested miracle. I had no idea how cool it was that we were going to be living in the middle of Greenwich Village, right off Washington Square Park.

With the U-Haul trailing behind the car, Barbara and Bernie made the road trip to drop me off. After we got all of my stuff up into the apartment, they looked around. Their faces said it all. To them, this was the strangest choice anyone could make. It was going to take a few weeks for us to get the place inhabitable. We had to paint, clean, and hire exterminators. I'm sure my parents thought I wouldn't stay. Back home, roaches were something people smoked—not something that shared our kitchen—but, for the first

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time, my spirit soared. I was home! The rent was \$380 a month, and often, we didn't have hot water. Today, that apartment would rent for more than ten times what we paid for it, and I'm sure the tenants have hot water.

The rebellion that made me a defiant child served me well in a place where drug dealers and murderers were equal occupants of the daily news. David Berkowitz, the "Son of Sam" serial killer, had just been apprehended. I'm not sure my parents knew about it, but guys like him didn't scare me enough for me to be frightened of the city. I returned to my parents' house for holidays and short visits, but it would no longer be my home. Later, I asked if they ever worried about me. Bernie said, "No, not that I remember." I think he was in denial. He was just avoiding thinking about me. If they'd known about some of the things I was doing, they would have worried or hauled me back. Maybe parents didn't worry then, or not in the way we do now.

Kathy and I learned to cook with help from her traditional Italian mother, Gloria, who lived in New Jersey. Gloria was always generous with groceries and brought us delicious food that she made. My favorite was her eggplant parmigiana. I had a charge account at a fancy Italian specialty food store. We ate brie, cooked fresh pasta, and ate rich, delicious desserts like crême brûlée—nothing I had grown up eating. That gourmet dream lasted until I didn't pay the bill for a couple of months. The store cut me off.

Kathy and I believed we had traveled lifetimes together and that our union was bound by an eternal contract. Even when we were on different continents, we stayed connected through the love letters we would write each other and the phone dates we would make, calling collect to overseas phone booths and getting away without paying. No matter how much we partied or which boyfriends broke our hearts, Kathy and I took care of each other. We shared everything—money, food, clothing, and our double bed.

Kathy was a talented singer. She performed in small cabarets and eventually mounted her own shows in the Village and SoHo. I was her producer. We loved all kinds of music. We visited museums and devoured the poetry of Cummings, Neruda, and Eliot. We were seduced by strong women writers: Sylvia Plath, Erica Jong, Marilyn French, Anais Nin, and Ayn Rand.

We regularly went to small, Off-Broadway plays. We saw Sam Shepard in the theater right before he won the Pulitzer in 1979 for "Buried Child." "The Elephant Man" had just made its Broadway debut. The theater was changing, challenging audiences with themes about hardship, struggle, and redemption. Stephen Sondheim's "Sweeney Todd" was provocative with edgy lyrics, dissonant melody lines, and a dark, twisted plot of revenge and love. As I sat in the theater with my mother and Kathy watching Len Cariou and Angela Lansbury bring on Tony Award performances, it never occurred to me that I would one day work on behalf of an actor as famous as Mr. Cariou.

The Village was a place where you could get very lost or find yourself. The street life, shops, clothing, musicians, drug dealers, guys playing pickup basketball, tattoo parlors, sex shops, food, dancing, bookstores, and Hare Krishnas chanting in their small parades made life there unlike any other place I'd experienced. I learned the hard way to ignore men who told me I looked like a model. One day, a guy followed me into my foyer and

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promised me I would make a lot of money if I let him take my picture with a wet tee-shirt. I wasn't dumb enough to think it was for real. The thought crossed my mind that he could rape me. My pocketbook was stolen a couple of times because I hung it on the back of my chair at a restaurant and didn't pay attention. Even when I felt like it would beat me, or I was lonely and life felt harder than I'd imagined it could be, the currency of New York City was possibility.

By my junior year at NYU, I knew I didn't want to "suffer for my art." Professional acting didn't feel like my path anymore. I changed my major to creative writing and literature. Kathy remained in acting school. She'd gone to beauty school before we met so she'd have a backup profession. I had nothing but my street-smarts; I had to stay focused so I would get good grades and find a good job. By day, my intellectual alter ego kept me sequestered in NYU's Bobst Library studying modern and postmodern literary works for my dissertation. By Friday night, I'd be ready to let loose.

In the late Seventies, the drinking age was 18. Kathy and I danced and drugged in the iconic clubs: Studio 54, Xenon, Ice Palace, and Max's Kansas City. We prepped a whole week for those Saturday nights. We borrowed clothes from each other and bought Paul Mitchell "Spritz Forte" (hair glue in a spray bottle) by the gallon. We'd be soaked in sweat from dancing, but our hairstyles would remain intact. We went with enough money for one drink and cab fare home. All night, guys would buy us drinks.

Disco wear was never acceptable in the daytime, but for the clubs, the bigger the hair and the more outlandish, bosomy, and shimmery the outfit, the better. A man in a white shirt with his collar turned up, a satin jacket, his shirt unbuttoned to his waist, and a medallion resting on his tanned chest...that was hot. Women wore gold lamé, leopard skin, sequined bandeau tops, fat belts, stretch halter jumpsuits with shoulder pads, and lots of iridescent glimmering stuff. Our platform shoes gave us the needed lift to compete. I was the beneficiary of Kathy's beautician's license; she rocked my hairstyles and makeup. Getting past the bouncers was a sport. Being rejected at the door would be a whole week's work wasted. The clubs opened at 11 p.m. We'd party all night and get home by the time the sun was rising.

We spent hours making our own mixtapes on dual-cassette tape recorders. If we weren't practicing our dance moves in the living room, we were working out. Jane Fonda was our idol. I had the Reebok high-top sneakers and leg warmers, but I couldn't keep up with the moves in aerobics class. I didn't have the coordination for it, so I wandered into the weight room where the guys worked out. I got a few looks that seemed to ask, "Who does she think she is?" Thin was in, and I wasn't intimidated; I was going to be "ripped."

Sex was available in unlimited ways and quantities. We were free to choose, but we weren't always choosing wisely. Sometimes we were shutting down, putting out, and shutting up. A roll in bed with a stranger was a gamble for an STD, but it could also be steamy.

Date rape wasn't talked about much. It happened more than most women acknowledged.

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Always fashion-forward, we sported “mulletts.” Then, we cut our long hair into shag-style layers; Kathy wore hers wildly curly, and I blow-dried mine into carefully pulled coifs to give it the “Farah Fawcett look.” Charlie’s Angels and Brooke Shields (nothing came between her and her “Calvins”) were setting the mainstream fashion standard. In the early Eighties, Betsy Johnson, Patricia Field, and Norma Kamali were trendsetters. At the same time, Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe were challenging the mainstream music and art of the time, digging up the underground that would become the bedrock for the New Wave punk and art movements.

The fuel crisis that produced lines at the gas stations back in the town where I’d grown up was always in the news. As serious as it was, it seemed inconsequential to us. If Kathy and I did any driving, we borrowed Gloria’s big, red 1977 Cadillac, which we nicknamed “the boat,” and took our bad-ass selves cruising around the city. Our usual mode of transportation was the subway, filthy and slow, with broken windows and graffiti-covered walls, and filled with the stench of the homeless.

Washington Square Park was the place where dealers congregated, but it was also our backyard. They were part of the scenery. We just walked past them and ignored their customary greetings: “Good smoke!” “Nice ass.” We were regularly grabbed in places strangers shouldn’t touch. We flipped them the finger and just kept walking.

We wandered around the cobblestone streets and industrial buildings of SoHo. Artists who weren’t yet discovered, and whose work would later become highly valued, mingled in new galleries that popped up, emerging high-end clothing stores, and bars that became hot with entertainment-industry types, models, and Wall Street’s super-rich. The Lower East Side was still mostly tenements known for housing beat poets, struggling musicians, writers, and the homeless subculture of squatters and addicts.

One afternoon, I was mugged at knifepoint in our apartment; I heard something in the hallway, but I ignored it. Then I heard the unlocked door open. I approached the man standing there to tell him he had the wrong apartment. He pulled out a switchblade and didn’t say a word. He advanced. I backed down the hallway, never taking my eyes off of him. He asked me if I had any money. I grabbed my purse from a table and gave it to him. I stayed silent.

“Give me your jewelry.”

I handed him the necklace and bracelet I was wearing. “Okay,” I said. “Now go.”

“Don’t scream, and you won’t get hurt. What else you got around here?”

I heard him say “scream,” and it triggered me to call for my neighbor...

“STAAAANLEEEY ! HELP!”

Stanley was a 70-year-old, bon-vivant textile designer. His big standard poodle always at his side, Stanley was no superhero, but he could have called the cops. Stanley, however, wasn’t home.

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My assailant didn't like that I'd yelled for help. When his fist hit my face, I felt the warm gush of blood from my nose.

"Why are you doing this?" I asked through my hand, which was now covering my face.

"I'm a drug addict. I need the money."

Was I really interviewing my assailant?

He cut the cord from the blinds with his knife and told me to sit in a chair. He tied my hands behind me and left. I think his intention was that I wouldn't immediately be able to call the police.

I got loose quickly and called 911. The cops came, and I offered them a beer.

"You're the one that could use the drink," one of them said.

If I'd had a gun, I would have shot my attacker. I wonder how that would have felt years later, telling the alternative ending to this story. I'd live with a little PTSD, my nose gets broken, and he dies. I'm happier with the truth. He got away, and the cops couldn't be bothered with trying to find him. He probably died of a drug overdose, and my life went on.

New York City was emerging from the tough economic times of the Seventies. Despite my mugging, the Village was considered relatively safe but the East Village along with "Alphabet City," "The Bowery," "Meatpacking," and Harlem were all off-limits. It was impossible to believe that those neighborhoods would one day be among the most sought-after and expensive real estate in the city.

The day MTV launched on cable in 1981 was as important to us as the launch of a space shuttle. The idea of a 24-hour, all music, commercial-free music video network was a huge media innovation. I went out and bought our new "modern" TV; the color screen was twenty-three inches and it weighed seventy-five pounds. A guy named Isaac sold it to me and gave me a good deal for the promise of a date. He and I eventually became good friends.

"Fame" (nominated for six Oscars) was the second-highest-grossing film that year, and a must-see for any aspiring actor or theater devotee. Its multiracial cast and behind-the-scenes look at LaGuardia High School for the Arts launched Irene Cara's career. "What a Feeling" was our theme song, setting us free as we belted out its lyrics.

Jennifer Beals' character, Alex, in "Flashdance" made a powerful statement about what was possible for a tough young girl who worked in a coal mine and dreamed of being a dancer. Her audition for a prestigious school of ballet lacked evidence of any formal training, but her outrageous, modern breakdancing won her acceptance. Her sexy boldness offered those of us who weren't overly gorgeous, well-off, or perfect at anything the possibility of beating the odds. Both Cara and Beals were women of color. These films showcased a new kind of beauty.

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Betty Freidan helmed the “women’s movement,” which was strengthening, and Gloria Steinem glamorized it. A new generation of us was coming on board. The Seventies and Eighties began delivering strong women in multiple sectors: politics, journalism, publishing, and law. But women were still pushing against a tidal wave of marginalization as well as physical and verbal abuse. Strong, leading women were now pouring into America’s living rooms via TV, and at the same time were constantly sexually objectified. It was just the beginning of women taking their place in directing and producing, but more than twenty-five years would pass before a female director would win an Academy Award.

The warning of television’s duplicitous role in American life had been forecast in the 1976 film, *Network*. The film’s lead character, Howard Beale, has a mental breakdown on the air. He had an epiphany that his decades-long identity as a trusted network anchor was a lie, as was the concept of network news. A young female programmer (Faye Dunaway) negotiated for control of a new segment, allowing Beale to rant, uncensored, live on television. Ratings soared. Unheard of at the time, the film foreshadowed the eventual format of “unscripted” or “reality” TV.

We couldn’t have imagined choosing from thousands of broadcast and digital options that we would one day watch on screens that wouldn’t even be TVs. For us, TV was the epicenter of entertainment, yet limited to three networks and the beginning of cable. *Saturday Night Live* with its original cast of Gilda Radner, Jane Curtain, Lorraine Newman, Bill Murray, John Belushi, Steve Martin, and Garrett Morris, was hilarious and cutting edge because they dared to openly parody every part of our culture. Not even our President was spared. If we were home, we would have friends over, get stoned, and tune in.

CNN launched in 1980, bringing the world to the U.S. in real time. The networks would begin to profit in the formerly unprofitable news space. Women were finally breaking into the male-dominated genre, too. Barbara Walters, Carole Simpson, Connie Chung, and Katie Couric would co-anchor the news. Diane Sawyer and Leslie Stahl would win awards for their broadcast journalism. But those positions challenged women to compete with men who were held to different standards. Christine Craft won the nation’s attention in the late Eighties with one of the first high-profile sex-discrimination cases when she was fired from a local news anchor position in Kansas City (at the age of 38) for not being young enough or pretty enough, and not being “deferential” to men.

TV, movies, music, magazines, and books influenced us and gave Kathy and me the idea that, as women in our generation, we’d be fighting stereotypes. But we also felt that we might have unprecedented possibilities. We were “Boomers,” but had no idea what being part of this generation would mean until later.

In 1979, my junior year of college, I landed a summer job traveling overseas with a charter travel company. I had spent two summers (before I’d moved to New York) stuffing envelopes in a fifth-floor walk-up, alone with a radio in an old building in Boston. I didn’t like my job, which was mindless, but I liked my lunch hour when I would walk around Faneuil Hall. I was determined to get something out of that experience, and

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I had a plan. The next summer, I was going to convince the owner, who my father knew, to allow me to travel to the Far East for the company. It was a long shot, but I was going. When the time came, he explained that sending a 19-year-old overseas was unheard of.

“I’m smart, good with people, and I know what the company does. I can do it. I’m mature for my age.” What was really mature for my age were my big breasts. I was unrelenting. He finally said yes.

For three months, I stayed in Hong Kong and traveled to China, South Korea, Japan, and Thailand. I was the youngest of my team. We were the liaisons between the travelers from the U.S. and the local tour companies. My leadership skills became apparent when one passenger had a heart attack and I had to manage 350 anxious people, much older than me, readying to board a plane. A riot nearly broke out.

Few young, female Americans were traveling in Asia alone, but our partner tour operators in Hong Kong were memorable and kind. I had outgrown the hitchhiking and knife-carrying days of my teen years. Now, I was humbled by the world I was experiencing and the many cultures I was learning about. I traveled through Thailand (my favorite), South Korea (where I was strip-searched), Tokyo (where I felt isolated—a lot like the movie *Lost in Translation*), and China (which in 1979 few Americans had yet visited). When I stepped off the train in Guangzhou, Chinese people were lined up just to see the Americans coming off the trains. My reddish curly hair and big feet were of special interest.

I went to places I’d dreamed of going when I’d been that little girl twirling buttercups, lying on the grass in my friend’s backyard, and imagining my life far away from our suburban development.

When my journey to the Orient began, I met a guy on the flight to Hong Kong. I think he was in his late twenties. He was starting an import/export business. He would come and go, staying with me in my hotel room when he was in Hong Kong. I liked it when he was there. He told me stories about his travels, and he knew a lot about the history of Asian art and culture. He took me to the best local places where most Americans would never get to eat. At the end of my trip, he was leaving for Bali. He wanted me to go with him. My dutiful inner voice kicked in. *You have to go back home to Kathy and your apartment in New York, and finish school. What would your parents say? You can’t just go with him.*

It was one of those decisions that would have changed the rest of my life. Doors open, doors close. But I wasn’t destined to make that trip. So many things would have been different for me. I wouldn’t have met Alan, so I wouldn’t have Daniel in my life, and I might not have had my career. Maybe I wouldn’t have lived in New York City. There were a handful of times when I might have gone left instead of right. Where would those choices have led me?

What would butterfly catching in Bali have been like? Sometimes I wonder.

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BUY A GOOD SUIT

A wise woman knows how to summon her courage
and do what is right, rather than what is easy.

~Suze Orman~

I returned to New York for my senior year and graduated from NYU in 1980. My father's sage and encouraging words on graduation day were mixed with his pride and a challenge.

"If you like your life here and you want to stay, you'll figure out how to pay your bills."

Jimmy Carter had waltzed us into one of the worst recessions in history with fuel shortages, the Iran hostage crisis, unemployment at nearly ten percent, and interest rates at double digits. Steady work and a decent paycheck were my biggest priorities; staying in the city I loved was my goal. Regardless of my decent college pedigree, a liberal arts-educated woman without a clear professional path was less marketable than a graduate from Katharine Gibbs, the secretarial college. I had been thrown out of typing class in sixth grade for writing "The quick brown fox fucked the lazy dog." I'd also convinced myself that I'd never have to type.

I was a hybrid: a former aspiring actress who was part hippie and part writer with little to write about. Major publishers were fierce titans in an industry that relegated young, hopeful female writers to editorial jobs that required typing and paid less than \$10,000 a year. I wrote essays and eloquent, long letters for my true loves. Kathy was my muse and my ear for the poems and short stories that wouldn't have a public audience. The idea of publishing seemed impossible. In the 1980s, Barnes & Noble became a mall staple, and it was my favorite store in Greenwich Village. Besides shoe shopping on 8th Street, I loved buying books, but writing one I would publish seemed impossible.

One day, I dressed up in a nice suit and went down to Merrill Lynch to apply for a stockbroker training program. I wasn't interested in a career on Wall Street, but I knew the money was good. When I arrived, I got into a line where men were waiting to fill out their applications. When I got to the front, I was told that women had to get in another line, type eighty words a minute, and pass a shorthand test. Men were being interviewed for the training programs. Women would be the secretaries for the men. I couldn't pass a typing test or take shorthand, so I was in the wrong line either way.

I thought about reaching out to the travel company I had worked for the year before, but that wasn't my dream. It would have been fun traveling overseas again, but eventually, I'd choose to come home. The way I'd been raised, the values I'd been born into, would lead me to a home that was mine in a place I knew—the modest, one-bedroom

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Greenwich Village apartment where Kathy and I had grown accustomed to the mice and roaches. There, if we had little else, we still had each other. I wanted a career that would afford me my dream: to wear nice clothes, eat in any restaurant, travel the world, treat my friends and family generously, and live somewhere in New York City with a view of Central Park or the East River.

I started calling travel agencies listed in the Yellow Pages. When a man answered the phone during one call, he said that if I could beat him at backgammon, he'd hire me. Strange, yes, but I was up for it. Kathy came along and waited downstairs. The office had paneling on the walls, and the windows were opaque with grime. I could tell the sun never shined through. I played backgammon well enough, but he kicked my ass. Still, he hired me. My boss's name was David. He was odd, but not mean or rude. I stayed at that dinky office for a year and a half. We were writing airline tickets for diamond dealers. (Back then, airline tickets were handwritten and kept in a safe.) I always felt like we were hiding something, though from whom I wasn't sure. I think he paid me \$150 a week off the books, but it was a job.

I decided to apply to law school. I took the LSAT and was accepted at a small New York City school, but Bernie made it clear that he wasn't paying for more education. His suggestion to move home and commute to a Boston school was a nonstarter. My life in New York was to be protected at all costs.

Scenes from my previous loser jobs played in my head. When I was 15, middle class was not classy enough for my tastes, my allowance didn't cover my love of shopping for clothes, and my mother was adamant that I work. My first job was for a Hickory Farms cheese store. My assignment was to roll a cheddar-cheese-like mash into a ball and then roll that in nuts to make their famous "cheese logs." I came home stinking of the place. My next job was a step up. I worked at Herman's World of Sporting Goods. It was there that my bosses figured out I was a terrible cashier, so they made me their accessory. They would check out expensive ski equipment and high-end sporting goods at my register for significantly discounted prices. I guess they figured I was a good target since my drawer would never balance anyway. I knew this was wrong and asked to be moved to the sales floor. That was way more fun and not illegal. Next, I tried waiting tables three times and failed miserably. I had severe issues keeping track of all the orders in the fast-paced, diner-like joints where I worked that served both cocktails and food. Eventually, I got a job at a Marshalls, which was a better fit because I loved clothes, but I spent my paychecks long before the money made it home. The worst job I had was as a chambermaid. Deplorable. I worked with a woman who smoked cigarettes and drank swigs of some unknown substance while she ordered me to clean filthy rooms, which included the remains of broken liquor bottles, soiled sheets, and disgusting bathrooms. My mother would be parked in the car when I came out. "How was work?" she'd ask. Was she kidding? What in God's name could I have told her? She knew it wasn't good.

My post-college successes were won in millimeters. I finally got a job through an employment agency. I was a receptionist for a meat trader. My boss would ship sides of beef from all over the world on big container ships and sell them to supermarkets and other large-volume meat buyers. He liked me and promoted me. My job had nothing to do with the meat; I got dressed up every day and acted like I was his secretary. He had a

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better job for me. He had a mistress, and I was his shill. He forgave my lack of typing and shorthand skills. Despite the girlfriend, he still tried to French-kiss me and grabbed me repeatedly. He was also a screamer. One day, I'd had enough. I went out to lunch and didn't return. Quitting wasn't something foreign to me, but quitting a job was different. This wasn't something encouraged by my parents—especially my father, who had worked since he was nine and had been on welfare growing up. I went home and hurled my failed self onto the couch. I called my mother, sobbing, but she was in a meeting.

The next day, I became an entrepreneur. I bought three really good suits: a black Pierre Cardin, a white Jones New York, and a green Albert Nipon. I couldn't afford even one of them, but I'd recently acquired a credit card, and no one was going to talk me out of it. I maxed it out. My business strategy was that if I invested in those suits, I'd at least look like I was worthy of consideration by a potential employer. I'd get a good job and pay off the card.

After failing typing tests and being told I was unemployable, I was finally hired for a temp job at a production company. The boss walked by my desk.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm the temp. Someone told me to sit here and answer phones."

"Who do you think you are, dressed like that? When you work in production, you might have to plunge toilets."

The boss called me into his office and told me I should look for a job with a little "power" in it—maybe go to work for a talent agent. I didn't know exactly what a talent agent did, but he'd said it with so much conviction. Toilet plunging didn't seem like a fun way to become a TV producer. The job was all wrong for me, but I still loved my suits.

Now I was unemployed again. I was a failure, but I didn't want to act that way. I threw a fox stole Kathy's mother had given her over the black Pierre Cardin suit and marched off to a lecture at NYU. Tom Wolfe was speaking. The film *The Right Stuff*, based on the book he had written, had just been released.

An older man sitting behind me leaned forward and told me he liked my suit. I thought he was disgusting and politely rejected his offer to take me out for a drink. Then he asked me if I wanted to meet Tom Wolfe. That worked better. If he knew Tom Wolfe, I thought, maybe I should be nice to him. He asked me what I did for a living, and I told him I was a TV producer. (I figured that sounded good even though I didn't know what a TV producer did.)

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He challenged me.

“What do you produce?”

“Well, I’m not producing yet, but I will be. TV, I hope.”

“I was a TV producer. Who do you know?”

He had me.

“Nobody,” I said, remembering the toilet plunger story. He said that he had a Rolodex and contacts in the business.

“What about that drink?” he asked.

I was a little afraid of the quid pro quo—but I went. The old man told me he’d been a TV producer in the 1940s and 1950s, in the days of live TV, for a program called Studio One Television. Now he owned a talent agency, and he represented Tom Wolfe.

I chose a nearby bar where the bartender knew me.

The old man was one of the first talent agents who, with his wife, represented performers for commercials, film, and television. His lengthy client list boasted all of the TV-commercial stars I had grown up watching, including “Madge the Manicurist.” For forty years, the actress Jan Miner was responsible for Palmolive being the #1 dish-washing detergent. I later learned she was paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to be “Madge.” That was serious money in 1982. She was his biggest client. I wasn’t certain of what the old man saw in me beyond my pretty face and that suit, but he offered me a job as his assistant.

I spent the next three years working for him.

The good news was that he didn’t care if I could type or take shorthand, and I had found a job I liked. The bad news was that I had to accompany him all over town visiting advertising agencies and bars where the people we were meeting didn’t like him. I convinced him he had to pay for my dry cleaning because I left work smelling like the fat, stinky cigars he smoked. He didn’t behave well, either. He regularly smacked my butt and tried to shove his tongue in my mouth. I would make light of it and tell him to cut it out. We had work to do. It was annoying, but I “filed” it. I had better things to focus on.

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The best thing that happened was when he tossed me a script for an animated series. He left me alone in the office with his scary wife, who hated me. I'm not sure what was more threatening—her voice or her long, red fingernails.

The first challenge was that I had to rack up the client's voice demo reels on the old "reel-to-reel" machine. If I made a mistake, the tape that was threaded through a series of little wheels would snap and break. This wasn't good. Asking his witchy wife for help would make things worse. Every once in a while, she would come in and give me a dirty look. Are you still here? By the morning, I had listened to the reels, and I'd matched all of the characters in the script with the actors I thought could voice them.

Even though Lester took all the credit, we booked three of the main roles for the series, which was called ThunderCats. This was fast and fun and didn't take as long as movie or theatrical deals. I was excited and wanted to do more of those castings. Eventually, the old man promoted me to be an agent. I began to focus mostly on voice performers in commercials. I was lucky that my desk, now at the other end of the office, was far away from his. I'd been relocated to sit next to Marilyn, a veteran agent who was willing to mentor me. She was a pro—soft-spoken, calculating, and elegant. She was nothing like the old man. I listened while she charmed the clients and made great deals. There weren't very many female agents to begin with, and she was black. I thought she was brave. I wanted to be like her. I started to figure out that most of the people the old man did business with thought he was eccentric and obnoxious. At 25, I respected what he had accomplished, but I thought his small business was limited. It was time to see what other opportunities might be out there.

I handwrote a letter to his biggest competitor, the founder of an up-and-coming talent agency that was dominating the New York commercials business. The old man disliked him, and

I wanted to know more. I got a call and a compliment on my beautiful handwriting. When I met the agency owner, he spoke quietly and thoughtfully and asked me a lot of questions about my life and my family. It was obvious he took his business very seriously, and success was of great importance to him. We met for a while, but he told me that because I didn't have a clientele that would follow me, I wasn't a strong candidate.

I thought I could easily build a client list. He just didn't know it. I didn't think an interview that had lasted over an hour should have resulted in outright rejection.

I sat on my couch at home. There must be other agencies to try.

A week later, I got a call at my office. The voice on the other end of the phone introduced himself as "Scott."

"Can you talk?"

He worked with the man I had just met. He explained that he knew I had visited the ThunderCats recording sessions and had been friendly with his clients who were also

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on the series. I thought I was in trouble, but he suggested that we meet. I learned it wasn't a bad thing. He liked that I was outgoing and "aggressive." (In the male-dominated industry of the 1980s, this was a compliment.) I was making myself known. He suggested I return for another meeting.

I met with Scott and his partner Steve. They both advocated for my hiring. I was offered \$5,000 less than what the old man was paying. That was a lot of money. I tried to negotiate, but it was "take it or leave it." I was in no position to take \$5,000 less. I was in no position to leave it.

One big incentive was that Scott was gay. At least he wouldn't sexually harass me.