
part one

1576–1982

It isn't so astonishing, the number of things I can remember, as the number of things I can remember that aren't so.

—Mark Twain (*true name: Samuel Clemens*)

Desperate Housewife

Oedipal tendencies are not abandoned during the infantile Oedipal period; they are abandoned at puberty and then only if the mechanism of displacement works successfully. . . . Removal is the process by which interest is removed from incestuous objects and attached to outside objects.

—*Sidney Tarachow*, *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 32, 1951

1951–1962

When I was a little girl, my dad was my best friend, and I was his.

During the workweek my father was the Invisible Man. But on weekends he was my companion and coconspirator, sneaking me milk shakes behind my mother's back, rolling his eyes at me over her head when she protested that milk shakes didn't satisfy her eight-ounces-of-milk-per-day rule. On Saturday mornings he'd shake me awake at dawn and we'd slink out, leaving my sleeping mother and baby brother behind. We'd drive to Queens for White Castle burgers, to Canal Street for kippered salmon and bagels, to horse farms in New Jersey to watch the yearlings train.

My dad and I did everything together. Things he liked to do, like hitting pop-up flies in the park. Things I liked to do, like watching *Dick Van Dyke* and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, sprawled

on our scratchy wool couch. And things my mother refused to do with him, like spending Saturdays handicapping the horses at Aqueduct.

I played my dad's trumpet in my elementary school orchestra. He and I acted out the screenplays he'd written before I was born, before he had to get a job, before he had to "grow up and support a family," as he often said. We recorded his plays on the Sony reel-to-reel tape recorder we'd driven downtown together, just the two of us, to buy. My dad always let me play the lead.

My 1950s homemaker mother was the bad cop, the keeper of the child-rearing checklist, the one who made me memorize my times tables and drink my milk and brush my teeth. Her frustration and her disappointment bubbled just below the glassine surface of our smoothly functioning lives. She was too smart, too ambitious, too capable to be stuck in our Upper East Side apartment, raising her kids, nursing her resentments.

My dad was a latter-day Mad Man, a reluctant account exec who bounced from one New York advertising agency to the next. He had his frustrations, too. He stored them in the bottom drawer of his dresser: the screenplays that would never see life beyond our daddy-and-daughter productions, each with a rejection letter paper-clipped to its cover page.

Even my father's second-choice career looked better to me than my mother's. He left our apartment in a cloud of Old Spice at 8 A.M. each morning, gleaming black Florsheims freshly polished, black leather attaché case in hand, prepped and propped for his important job.

My father and I had everything in common, including this: we liked each other more than either of us liked my mother. She didn't understand us. We only understood each other. My mother was an annoying interloper, a cumulous cloud that shadowed us, threatening to rain on our parade. I found ways to put distance between her fate and mine. I found ways to nestle up to my dad.

1963–1965

When I turned twelve I sprouted breasts and bled into my Carter's underpants and lost interest in my father's plays and my father's trumpet and my father's Saturdays at the track. Everything I wanted, suddenly, was forbidden. Everything I did was wrong.

I wanted to go to the High School of Music and Art with the cool, beatnik kids. My parents sent me to the more academic, more prestigious, dorkier-than-thou Bronx High School of Science instead. *Science? Me?* Their edict ultimately served me well, but not exactly in the way they'd hoped.

1966–1971

I met a boy in my sophomore year, a boy who stood on the corner outside Bronx Science before, during, and after classes, passing out antiwar leaflets, smoking skinny, stinky joints. A boy who won the Bob Dylan look-alike contest without even trying. A boy who entered the school building only to distribute the underground newspaper he wrote and published on his very own home mimeograph machine.

The first time Carl came to my house to pick me up, my father took in his wild Jewfro, peace-sign-strewn Army surplus jacket, and holey jeans, and snapped, "Where are you taking my daughter?"

"Wherever she wants to go," Carl drawled in that sexy, I'm-above-it-all way of his.

"You are never to see that boy again," my father thundered later that night when I walked in, two hours past curfew.

"His name is Carl," I shouted. "And I love him."

"He's not good enough for you!"

"I'm fifteen years old! You can't tell me what to do."

"I just did. And your mother will be keeping tabs on you when I'm not home."

Of course I sneaked out to see Carl, and of course my mother told my father, and of course my father layered punishments

onto me like bricks mortared into a retaining wall—no TV, no phone, no going out on weekends, no fun.

And just like that, my hero became my enemy. I wasn't my father's best friend anymore; I was his snarling, seething prisoner. We didn't lie around on the couch anymore, watching Hitchcock. We didn't roll our eyes at each other behind my mother's back. We screamed at each other and threatened each other and stomped off to opposite ends of our white-carpeted apartment. No matter how desperately I writhed, he wouldn't release me from the trap he'd laid. I chewed at my paws, desperate to escape.

I had a choice to make: my father's love, or Carl's.

Don't think twice, Babe, it's all right.

Amazingly, I made it to the graduation ceremony of the Bronx Science class of 1968. Not so amazingly, I was expelled before the ceremony was through.

Unbeknownst to any adult (over thirty, not to be trusted), I'd predistributed to each of my fellow grads a black armband emblazoned with a white peace sign. As preagreed, when New York's popular Mayor Lindsay appeared on the stage of the Loew's Grand Concourse Theater, three hundred preordained Leaders of Tomorrow silently raised clenched fists, peace armbands on proud display. Without hesitation, the principal strode down the aisle and yanked me out of my seat. "You! Out!" he barked.

For perhaps the first time ever, I obeyed a school administrator's orders. My parents seemed unimpressed by my newfound compliance. They dragged me to the family car, tossed me into the backseat, and advised me not to speak until spoken to. The ride home to Manhattan was not a companionable one.

Shortly thereafter, I packed a duffel bag, snuck out of my parents' Upper East Side apartment, and took the subway to Astor Place. I wasn't the only wild-haired, wild-eyed runaway schlepping her stuff down St. Mark's Place on that hot, muggy,

summer-of-love day in 1968, but I'm sure I was luckier than most: welcomed with open arms and spare key at the Lower East Side brownstone where my boyfriend lived with his cool, commie parents. "Honeys, I'm home," I said, and handed a delighted Carl my duffel bag and followed him to his room.

I was glad to be free of my parents, but I missed Doug, my twelve-year-old brother, achingly. Once a week at the designated time, he'd wait in the phone booth on the corner of 83rd and Lex, and I'd call him from the \$95-a-month Greenwich Village studio apartment I'd moved into with Carl.

In early 1969, my father got a job in London and moved my mother and brother there. Doug and I couldn't talk anymore; we could only write to each other, paper-thin blue aerograms stippled by our frantic ballpoint pens. Four years later, when Doug turned sixteen, he came to live in Berkeley with my new boyfriend, Sean, and me.

Left at last to their own devices, after twenty years of marriage my parents divorced.

1972–1981

For the next few years, my brother and I did pretty much the same things at pretty much the same time.

In 1974, I married Robert, a nice, normal Gentile guy, and Doug married Susie, a nice, normal Gentile gal. The four of us moved to the East Bay town of Hayward, California, and started having kids. Doug and Susie's were born in May 1978 and December 1980; Robert's and mine, in December 1978 and May 1980. We sent the cousins to the same babysitters. Our parents sent them birthday cards from two different addresses.

Flooded with hormones the day after Matthew was born, I was flooded, too, with a sudden craving for my dad. I called him from my hospital bed, hoping he'd be as excited about my baby as I was, as excited as I'd always wanted him to be about me.

"You have a grandson," I said. "His name is Matthew."

My father was silent. All I heard was his breath, labored and thick. *He's crying*, I thought. *Finally we're feeling the same thing.*

"He's so beautiful," I said. "I wish you were here."

Another silence.

"Dad?"

"Yes?" my father said in that distracted, *How-soon-can-I-get-off-the-phone* voice of his.

"Did you even hear a word I said?"

"Of course." I knew my father was scrambling to remember what it was. "Say hello to little Michael for me," he said finally.

"His name is *Matthew*," I said, choking back bitter tears.

In 1977, our father wrote to tell Doug and me that he was getting married. "I hope you'll meet Natalie and her two sons sometime."

In 1979, he wrote to tell us that he and Natalie were getting a divorce.

Doug and Robert and I got jobs on the last of the Bay Area auto assembly lines, GM for Doug and Robert, Ford for me. We spent fifty-eight mandatory OT hours a week "organizing the working class," building competing trucks, attempting to convince our disappointingly unenthused fellow proletarians to overthrow the bourgeoisie.

In 1980, our father married Gloria, another woman we'd never met, a woman six years older than me. My father got a job in Puerto Rico, and he and Gloria moved to a beachfront condo there.

For the next decade, my brother and I saw our father once or twice a year. He'd blow into town, take Doug and me out to dinner, recite his objections to our choices of career, politics, and spouse, buy each of us a Sony TV or a refrigerator, and disappear again.

Once, my brother and I insisted that our father invite my sister-in-law and my husband to join us for dinner. As we chewed our steaks and stirred bacon bits into our baked potatoes, our father ignored them, addressing his remarks only to Doug and me.

"You were so rude," I fumed as my father and I waited curbside for Robert to fetch the car.

My father craned his neck, scanning the parking lot, radiating annoyance. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about the way you treat the people your children married. The parents of your grandchildren. Do you even know their *names*?"

"Maybe you should think about why you're so desperate for my approval," my father said without looking at me. "Maybe you married the wrong man."

When Robert pulled up, my father slid into the passenger seat and sat silently, staring straight ahead. None of us said a word during the half-hour drive to his hotel.

The word "Dad" evaporated from my vocabulary. On the rare occasions when Doug and I talked about our father, we called him by his first name. He was our kids' only grandfather, but he was a stranger to them. Increasingly he was a stranger to me.

1982

Growing up in action-packed, center-of-the-universe Manhattan prepared me poorly for where and how I found myself living at age thirty-two: with my legally wed husband and 2.0 children in a suburban San Jose ranch house at 1234 Champagne Lane, an address I couldn't have made up if I tried.

Talk about your desperate housewife. My present was such an unlikely outcome of my past that I awoke most days feeling I'd fallen down someone else's rabbit hole. Robert was a good man, loyal and funny and fiercely devoted to his kids. But since we'd met on a United Farm Workers' picket line ten years before,

my life, and our marriage, had been cruising down the bored-to-death highway without any brakes.

Mondays through Fridays I climbed into my pantyhose and my Volvo, deposited the kids at the local preschool, then crawled through Silicon Valley traffic to the gray-flannel cubicle where I traded my labor power for my kids' preschool fees. If you'd told me fifteen years earlier that I'd end up as a technical writer at National Semiconductor, building chips for Reagan's Trident missiles, I would have said you'd had too much of what Alice was smoking. I'd applied to National as an assembly line worker, hoping to organize a union among the mostly immigrant female workers. Being a warm-blooded, seemingly educated person of the Caucasian persuasion, over my protests that yes, I really *did* want to work on the line, I'd been hired as a technical writer instead.

I was a stranger in a strange land, airlifted into marital and occupational monotony on the wings of some idealistic notions, emotional and political, that didn't quite fly. If I got the marriage license, I'd told myself, love would last forever. If I brought my sixties ideals to the suburbs, I'd help bring injustice to an end.

Things weren't exactly working out that way.

Desperately seeking *something*, while my sons pitched Cheerios at each other one Sunday morning, I combed the help-wanted ads for a job that might make better use of me. Listings abounded for clean room supervisors and electrical engineers, but there was a distinct dearth of opportunities for a lapsed do-gooder in search of a more meaningful life.

I pulled out my pre-Silicon Valley Rolodex and start calling old friends. Bingo. One of them knew someone who knew someone who knew that a hero of mine, whom I'll call Dr. Roselyn Taylor, was looking for a freelance editor. Taylor had founded several feminist organizations and had authored an armful of feminist books. Her antisogynist antics had earned her a special place in my own Hall of Feminist Fame.

I called Roselyn, attempting to conceal my guru worship. We made a date to meet.