8466_Paternot_01_j.qxd 6/21/01 2:20 PM Page 1

PART 1

8466_Paternot_01_j.qxd 6/21/01 2:20 PM Page 2

8466_Paternot_01_j.qxd 6/21/01 2:20 PM Page 3

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THE AMERICAN DREAM

8466_Paternot_01_j.qxd 6/21/01 2:20 PM Page 4

8466_Paternot_01_j.qxd 6/21/01 2:20 PM Page 5

It all began with snails.

My first memory took place in our backyard in San Francisco where my mom would sprinkle snails on the hedges near the front lawn to churn the earth. Before I could even talk, I played in the mud with these slow-moving, slimy creatures. Playing with snails probably made me think I moved pretty fast.

I was born in San Francisco in 1974. Beyond the snails, I don't remember much more about the American phase of my childhood. There's a photo of me on the beach from that time, and I'm the little kid with a head three times too big for his body. And I'm completely blonde. The little kid in that picture seems like an imposter since my hair went to a very dark brown as I grew up.

After San Francisco, we moved to Switzerland, but getting there requires a brief detour. My dad is Yves Paternot, a Frenchman who graduated from Harvard Business School and cofounded Adia,

8466_Paternot_01_j.qxd 6/21/01 2:20 PM Page 6

which eventually became one of the largest temp companies in the world.

While he attended Harvard Business School, my mom—Mia Heineman—was at Boston University. After they met and fell in love, my mom dropped out; she never formally finished her degree. Once married, they moved to California so dad could start a U.S. branch of Adia, and shortly thereafter, Maddy, my sister, was born. Two years later, in 1974, I came along.

When I was four, my dad was transferred to Switzerland to set up the Swiss branch of Adia, and so we moved to Lausanne. This wasn't such a bad move for my dad since he'd be closer to his parents, who lived in Europe, but my whole American background was essentially erased overnight.

I was enrolled in Mont Olivet, a Catholic school in Lausanne. My teachers were nuns—and with nuns came rules. We had to follow the rules, like studying catechism every day, or else.

Lausanne is in the French-speaking region of Switzerland. Since I was only four (I'd stay until I was age nine), I essentially forgot whatever English I'd learned and French quickly became my preferred means of communication.

The entire Swiss population is less than 6 million people, and Lausanne is a tiny town near a large lake surrounded by the Alps. Approximately 250,000 people live there; everything is classic village life. Don't get me wrong. People love to vacation there. It's a beautiful little country. But the key word is *little*.

My problem with small-town life is the small-town mentality that comes with it. I'm sure that some Swiss people will be pissed at me when they read this, but here's the bottom line: It's a great place to retire (think Florida with mountains), but it's strange to grow up there. Even the presidential system is bizarre. One of the first things I realized about the society I grew up in was that they have six presidents who rotate into office every two years. So, if you ask Swiss citizens, especially young ones, who their president is, they rarely

8466_Paternot_01_j.qxd 6/21/01 2:20 PM Page 7

know. They actually don't know who their president is. I find this especially ironic since Europeans have such a good time making fun of Americans.

When I was eight years old, my mom and dad divorced after 11 years of marriage. This was during my fourth year in Switzerland, and at the risk of overstating the obvious, I'll say it was a tremendous event in my life. I remember crying, but for some reason thinking they weren't actual tears. I went through the motions of grief because that's what I thought I was supposed to do. But I actually felt happy about the fact that I was going to live with mom. I would be the man now.

My mom is a very liberated American woman. My dad is, you know, *French*. I think my mom went into the relationship loving my father, but hoping to turn him into the man she always wanted him to be. Of course, my dad entered the relationship never wanting to change anything.

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After my parents split up, my mom, Maddy, and I moved to a small apartment. We'd been living in Lausanne in a nice house with a garage and a large garden. Thinking about it now, I don't think my mom had much money. She was supporting us with whatever money she'd inherited from her parents. We may not have had much money, but I enjoyed plenty of entertainment. I remember watching movies like *Condor Man* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* in the local little Swiss theater. Even at this early age, I was open to creative influences, and what seemed like basic images to others were powerful visions to me. Meanwhile, my dad would visit as much as he could, bringing us gifts, new Walkmans, and other electronics that he picked up on business trips to Japan.

After living in Switzerland for five years, just as I was fully adjusting to speaking French, my mom told us we were moving back to the States. My dad, however, stayed in Switzerland and married my

8466_Paternot_01_j.qxd 6/21/01 2:20 PM Page 8

stepmother Monica; shortly thereafter, Eric and Sophie, my half-brother and half-sister, were born.

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We moved to Greenwich, Connecticut, to a place called Lyon Farm, near where my mother grew up. In Switzerland, we'd been speaking franglais, a kind of pidgin French and English. In Connecticut, I had to start all over and learn English.

At this time my mom started dating. She briefly dated two chumps, and then she met Anders Bergendahl, a London-based Merrill Lynch banker who she's been married to for nearly 20 years now. Of course, I had no idea at the time they'd end up together for so long. All I knew was that this guy lived in London, and that was a long ways away. Mostly, I was pleased that she'd finally met a man she could love. But I was a lot less pleased that we were moving (again) to London.

And so, a year and a half after arriving in Connecticut from Switzerland from San Francisco, we picked up and moved to England. Of course, by this time, my English was a half-French, half-American hybrid-cum-disaster.

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We lived in a narrow, dimly lit house in Kensington, right off Victoria Road. It was a cool house that looked like a run-down East Village walk-up in New York City, with a tiny garden. Not long after settling in, it was my mom and Anders's turn—soon David and Alexander, my next two half-brothers, were born.

My first few months in London were so scary. I went to a school called Hill House, which is an international school with a distinctly British flavor. The guy who ran it was an old British colonel. Everything was "Discipline! Righto, everyone!" I received cadet training with actual rifles. My fellow students had a lot of fun mimicking my

8466_Paternot_01_j.qxd 6/21/01 2:20 PM Page 9

American-French accent. (When people are making fun of you, you prefer that they not be armed!)

I quickly noticed the major distinction between the American and the European school systems. In England, everything is handed to you on a platter but then force-fed down your throat. It's easy, since you don't have to make any decisions. But the reality is you don't have any choices.

Hill House was famous for making kids wear knickerbockers—little, red, puffy pants. You're just asking to be beaten up in the street. Then they add in a bright rust-orange sweater. We looked like we'd been rudely yanked from the pages of a Dickens novel. Every day we'd walk from the school, which is in Knightsbridge, up to Kensington Gardens in the most spastic uniforms ever seen. There we'd play soccer and rugby until our knees and feet were lacquered in mud—there were no gym outfits—and then come back to class all dirty and sweaty for the rest of the day.

The food was standard British crap. After a while, I began to get over the culture shock and started excelling at math. I was still very poor at writing, however. I'd never read the books like *Catcher in the Rye, Animal Farm,* and all the classics that are standard school reading. So I had never developed any idiomatic ease or analytical skills in English, and now they wanted me to read Shakespeare.

At 13, I was admitted to the City of London School, an all-boys British school where I'd stay till 16. My tenure at CLS wasn't helped by my unfortunate foot problem: flat feet. I had an operation to fix my right foot, and because of my bad feet, I couldn't wear regular shoes. I always had to wear sneakers. So I'm in this British school where everyone's in dark uniforms, and God, did I stand out in the crowd! I became known as the "kid with the white sneakers." Half the kids hated me because I had them, and the other half thought I was cool—the only kid who'd managed to break the rules.

8466_Paternot_01_j.qxd 6/21/01 2:20 PM Page 10

At CLS, we had a choice of community service or combined cadet force. I opted for combined cadet force. What a moron! For two years, I did full military training. Not only did we practice during the week, but there were sessions during the year when we'd head to the countryside and suffer the indignity of nocturnal, self-reliance military training.

They used to drop us off 20 miles from our tents. We'd have 24 hours to get back to base camp. We had to carry 50-pound packs while wearing full military gear. Since I had to wear rigid military boots, my feet were bloody stumps.

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In the sense that a British school is all about education at the expense of socialization, the City of London School was the worst of the worst. They forgot that we need to mature as human beings, too. Maybe these particular boys were so cruel and socially inept because they had no training in how to interact with females. We were 16 and completely clueless! I had to adapt—and fast.

It so happened that my sister was going to the American School in London, which sounded like a dream. First of all, it was co-ed. Plus, it was international, there were no uniforms, and you picked the classes that interested you. What a concept!

So at 16, I tested into the American School. It was 1990. Since my sister is a year and a half older than me, we were at that stage when brothers and sisters don't get along all that well. She and her friends were into older men, and I was the drooling younger brother. Inevitably, that awkward period began to close.

Meanwhile, in school I discovered computer science. Programming was particularly interesting to me. Until then, the only computer I ever had was a Commodore 64 with 64K RAM, and I used it to play some primitive cassette games. (There was one called "Chopper Command" I was very fond of.)

8466_Paternot_01_j.qxd 6/21/01 2:20 PM Page 11

Now, all of a sudden, I'm sitting in front of these computers called Apples and I'm thinking, *What the hell are these?* At City of London School, I'd used these Brit computers like Acorn and Spectrum, but they were just pathetic pieces of equipment.

In the American School, I discovered the Macintosh and what a hard drive was. Then they started showing us these things called BBSs (Electronic Bulletin Boards) in the States, where you could call up America and "download" things. I got my first 300 baud modem; one night, I hooked up to the phone line for eight hours straight on a long-distance call to download a half-meg game. The phone bill was astronomical. My parents were not pleased.

I was fascinated by the whole concept of these BBSs. Back then, half the fun was trying to find the phone numbers to these exclusive clubs. There were ultra-elite BBSs, and you had to know someone who could get you in. And, of course, you couldn't download something unless you uploaded something. You had to earn credits so you could download. As I slowly turned into a geek, I started spending an alarming amount of time playing computer games.

During my first semester, I took Intro to Computer Science with Professor John Servente. This guy was incredibly quirky; you either loved him or you hated him. And if you loved computers, he loved you. Remember, we had just come out of the late 1980s when people were still asking, "Why the hell should I have to take a computer science class? I'm never going to use a computer."

While I was discovering Apples, I'd also discovered girls. Even better, I'd been told that a girl or two in school were actually convinced I was cute. As it happened, I ended up dating a very hot, very popular girl—Elayna. (Even her name was sexy.) We wound up going out for the following two and a half years, two of which would be a long-distance relationship.

How bizarre it was that I, Stephan Paternot, a computer geek who'd never known how to speak to a girl, became the envy of most

8466_Paternot_01_j.qxd 6/21/01 2:20 PM Page 12

of my male classmates. When I look back on the pride I had then, walking around with Elayna on my arm, I think, *How pathetic.* But back then, it made a significant difference to my whole perspective on life: It was the first sign that one could transcend the barriers of what one wanted to pursue, yet not be locked in as a one-track geeky engineer.

Anyway, as my computer science education evolved, I decided to push things further and take a programming class. From there, I moved into advanced programming—almost all in Pascal. The more I took, the more I got into it.

Back then, the visual manifestation of what I was doing was mainly a black screen with text scrolling up and down. I mean it was exactly like DOS. This was long before pointing and clicking.

Programming for me quickly became all about identifying a problem and deciding what to do about it. What did I want the machine to do? Then I'd backtrack my way from there. I sometimes worked on accounting systems; other times it was drawing. Sometimes it was just mathematical problems—extremely complex mathematical problems that required a computer to execute.

Programming for me just felt *good.* I liked being up at 4:00 in the morning, in my own little world where there were no limits to what I could do. I could make the machine change what it could do, do it faster, more efficiently, figure out these problems . . . problem *solving.* With physics, something I'd briefly considered, I could figure stuff out on paper, but there was nothing especially tangible to make. With a computer, I could get a glimpse of the future. In retrospect, I realize we were just coming out of the Dark Ages and I was watching it unfurl.

Aside from computer science, my only other interest, or skill I should say, was born out of my history and psychology classes. Unbeknownst to me, my teachers thought that my communication skills were good. I discovered this one day when my history teacher asked if I'd like to join the debate team. I was naturally surprised,

8466_Paternot_01_j.qxd 6/21/01 2:20 PM Page 13

considering I had changed languages and cultures so many times. I had become accustomed to living a somewhat shy and introverted life, and communicating or debating was the last thing I was interested in. Although I didn't join the debate team, I did elect to join the Model United Nations program in which students from all over the world fly to The Hague in Holland to represent countries in mock debates. On my first occasion, I represented Russia and amazingly passed my resolution for nonproliferation of nuclear weapons around the world. Presenting in front of 3,000 students was no piece of cake, but it was the first sign that I could speak well in public, and I loved it. This was the first inkling that there might be more to my life than just programming.

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As I approached the end of high school, my next move—college—became a huge issue. I'd taken the SAT and scored a 720 in math and a 540 in verbal. Clearly, my math was stronger. My dad had always wanted me to study in Switzerland to be near him. He wanted me to go to The Polytechnic Federal School of Lausanne, a pure engineering program in a small town. I was opposed to this idea, but dad was adamant. He said, "Steph, I pay my taxes, which automatically gets you free university in Switzerland." For him, it was an opportunity to save a large amount of money. It was a good engineering school that was prepaid, and he definitely thought engineering was my thing. But I wasn't convinced. For the first time, I was discovering new horizons. I'd seen *Animal House* and all those other crazy stories about college life in America, and I wanted to have that experience. I wanted to be 10,000 miles away from the family, be alone to discover and experience life in an entirely different world (of course, you never realize the downsides—20/20 hindsight and all).

I was always reluctant to confront my dad. (I would oppose my mom, but not my father.) When and if I had to challenge him, my hands would be shaking with fear at the prospect. When he came to

8466_Paternot_01_j.qxd 6/21/01 2:20 PM Page 14

visit in London my final year in high school, we had another debate about my future, and I burst into tears, hating him for making it so difficult to tell him what I really wanted. I recall being in a restaurant with my dad and my stepmother Monica, and her saying, "Yves, let the kid speak." She understood that it's not always about winning. It's about . . . do you want to be loved for the rest of your life? Do you want your kids to look up to you for the rest of your life, or do you want them to hate you? I was in tears from frustration and nerves, and I felt betrayed in not being able to express myself openly.

I wanted to curse at him so badly. Do something that would insult him. But the last time I had done so resulted in a terrible scene for the both of us. I was much younger that time and had let a curse slip in the course of a conversation I was having with my dad. Out of reflex, he slapped me in the mouth, sufficiently hard enough that my lip split. I started bleeding all over myself. I started crying, feeling humiliated from being slapped, and my father was embarrassed by what he'd done. Of course, my father is not a bad man who liked to beat me. But a thing like that has a fundamental impact on you, especially when you're young. After that, I was never really very comfortable speaking my mind around him.

So the argument about college continued; I wanted to go to the States and my mom supported my decision to leave. I'd applied to Penn, Cornell, Tufts, and a few backup schools, and was admitted to most of them. I didn't get into Brown, which would have been my original choice. And so it came down to Penn and Cornell. I decided to attend Cornell because it was the better school for what I wanted to pursue.

My dad remained steadfast, "You're going to Switzerland."

I said, "No. This time I'm doing what I want."

I was on my way to Ithaca.