



I'll

Drink

to That

A LIFE IN STYLE, WITH A TWIST

Betty Halbreich

WITH REBECCA PALEY

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Some of the characters described in this book are composites, drawn from the author's many years of experience. The names of some of the author's customers have been changed out of respect for their privacy.

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*To Kathy and John, my grown-up children, and the wonderful accomplished grandchildren they have blessed me with:
Gillian, Hannah, and Henry*

When you are Real you don't mind being hurt. . . .
Once you are Real you can't become unreal again.
It lasts for always.

—*The Velveteen Rabbit*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It would take many chapters to mention all those in my life¹ who play such momentous roles.² They know who they are, and there are many heartfelt thank-yous for keeping my dance card filled!

The pieces I pulled the day before were lined up in my dressing room with military precision, in the order I planned to present them to my client—a very tailored woman who typically wore extremely expensive clothing—were a cashmere double-breasted jacket, various tops in crisp white percale, cropped khaki pants, and dresses categorized into ones for day and others for night. They weren't separates unified simply by taste but rather possessed a continuity that I saw in my head and would introduce to the client on her body. The cashmere jacket was to be paired with the cropped pants for a weekend afternoon or matched with the charcoal gray skirt for a business lunch—and white percale goes with practically anything. Together the disparate items I gathered made a series of outfits. A story, if you like. To have a closet fully packed and presented to you is a gift. That is not to say that the women I work with adore all the items I choose, but the experience of walking into my dressing room for an appointment makes for something individual and special. The clothes I work with as a personal shopper (a title I have never particularly favored) are an extravagance unto themselves—the price tags on many are often too rich for my midwestern sensibilities. Yet the true luxury of what I do is the knowledge my client has as I slip a sweater over her shoulders or zip a dress up the back that I was thinking only of her when I selected the garment.

Many women are nervous when they first step into my office. I am the antidote to the intimidation of shopping, but it is difficult here at Bergdorf Goodman, probably the most beautiful store there is because of the years on it. Even the location of its elegant, mansard-style building on the site of the former Vanderbilt mansion is venerable. One walks into the store and gasps: It is truly opulent. Light twinkles from crystal chandeliers at the center of magnificent white rotundas. Even updated, the French moldings and paneled walls display old-fashioned charm that simply cannot be built into new stores.

It's beautiful, but the store itself is not all that my clients are seeking. Often their need runs deeper. A great many of them require mothering, which I provide in various ways. The simplest is the advice dispensed from the list of purveyors I have amassed over the years in a leather-bound book I keep handily on my desk. My clients don't just ask me about what to wear; they also want to know the best nursery schools to send their children to, a hand laundry that does linens, or the best chocolates I have ever eaten. And I oblige—with dentists, party planners, bakeries, whatever they require. I am the ultimate trusted source, because when a person enters my dressing room and takes off her clothes, I must instill confidence. I also become a listening post and hear things my clients won't tell their husbands, best friends, or real mothers. I don't mind. It's much easier to take care of other people than it is yourself. I put a lot of myself into the heads and bodies of my clients, whom I want to dress as well as I would myself. Having grown up around and lived with beautiful clothes and fabrics all my life, I sometimes find it difficult to see the new and appreciate it—even here at Bergdorf Goodman, a store many consider to be the ultimate in fashion and my place of work for the last thirty-eight years. But I romance the clothes in my mind. Instinctively I feel the fabric, see the allure.

When I'm gathering, I can have only one woman in mind. This approach takes longer, but I've never been much of a multitasker. It also has the blessed benefit of making the seven floors of the Fifth Avenue store new every time I travel them for a different client. By the end of a season, the clothes are like old relatives that one knows all too well. But in the game I play with myself, looking closely at the same departments and clothes as if I have never seen them before, I always find

something new.

In the dressing room, I straightened a persimmon sheath dress and considered the woman arriving in several hours for an appointment to answer two different needs: a new dress for a benefit luncheon hosted by her daughter and a few pieces that were more casual than she was used to for a trip to Aspen with an old college friend who was not nearly as dressy as she. Calling them “needs” was something of a misnomer. In truth, we need very little. Certainly nobody needs all these clothes. Want, however, is something else. Whether they buy them at H&M or Bergdorf, women love clothes. You can get someone at the lowest point of her day and make her feel good (at least for a moment) with a new shirt or, even better, a dress. It doesn’t matter how erudite or worldly someone is—doctors, bankers, artists—they all want a fix. The client in question, a lawyer who worked at a top Manhattan firm, was no exception. Her large frame, however, made fitting her a challenge. Over the years I had gently nudged her away from her comfort zone of jackets and matching suits to a softer, more feminine look. The mere fact that she was big didn’t mean she wasn’t a woman. As with most of my clients, I had known her a long time. Her mother-in-law had been one of my first friends when I moved to New York and has been dead twenty-seven years. I don’t believe in disposable fashion or people.

The phone rang in my adjacent office. Back at my desk to answer the call, I looked out at the stunning view from my office window that unfurls past the Plaza and the Pulitzer Fountain, to Central Park, and up Fifth Avenue. Although it was raining when I got into a cab to come to work, I could see the sun breaking through over the Upper East Side.

On the end of the telephone line was another long-standing client calling to say she needed new pants.

“What do you need new pants for?” I asked. I’m the only salesperson on earth to dissuade customers from buying; I’m known for it. Here was a woman whose husband of forty years was dying of pancreatic cancer and she was contemplating pants?

“I know exactly what you have, because I sold them to you,” I said.

“They are not very exciting. Exciting pants I’ve never seen. Unless we are talking about what’s inside pants.”

The woman on the phone didn’t need pants; she needed a visit. She had fallen out of my life for a long time but reappeared six months earlier, after her husband’s diagnosis. Ever since then she had come for a lot of retail therapy. I kept the appointments frequent but the bills low.

I made a mental note to find out where one could buy those special tabs to affix to zippers for women who have to get into dresses by themselves—another client of mine, whose husband had had a stroke, showed me the clever invention last time she was in the store. This client, too, would need them to zip her own dresses when her husband would eventually lose his battle to cancer.

“We will get you something,” I told her, taking out my well-worn leather-bound datebook. “When do you want to come in?”

Just as I finished writing the word “pants” under her appointment entry in my book, in walked my first client of the morning, a new person I had only previously talked to on the phone.

Through all the years of being “at the same station” and seeing the many hundreds of personalities who’ve come through the door during that time, as soon as someone enters my office, I pretty well know what I’ll be dealing with. The unsmiling woman before me, clad in all black, birdlike in stature and movement, clutching a small purse as if it were a life preserver, was a reluctant patient. No doubt about it.

Now standing on my threshold, Mrs. P, the silver-haired society wife of an industrialist, had been adamant when we talked on the phone prior to her appointment about why, after nearly fifty years of dressing herself, she’d decided to come to me.

“I have to dress appropriately,” she’d said. “None of my beautiful clothes are appropriate for me

anymore.” She named every French, American, Italian couture designer in her closet!

“You’re making it too important,” I had replied. In our subsequent conversation, the frustration in her voice lessened as we talked about her desire for a change to suit her age. In other words, she needed an updating.

Yet as I now made eye contact with this woman, who lived in an apartment with a prominent address, full of art and beautiful clothes, I could see she was absolutely petrified. It’s a peculiar phenomenon, but generally when women first come to me, they are very apprehensive. I don’t know why: Maybe it’s the store that people have adorned with so many absurd titles, like “Mecca of Style” or “Fifth Avenue’s Finest.” Maybe it’s me. Maybe it’s my white hair!

Sensing this apprehension in Mrs. P, I immediately sat her on the soft love seat beside my desk to make light chatter. After all, I’m here to serve. My bedside manner settled her down while we retraced ground on her needs and desires.

“I would like to look like *you*,” Mrs. P said.

As she gave my ensemble of twenty-year-old black pants, a chartreuse collarless jacket, and gold star pin that had been my mother’s the old up-and-down, I thought if she only she knew how little clothes meant to me. I have often toyed with the idea of wearing a vendeuse smock like the kind they used to wear in the ateliers in Paris, but I must keep a semblance of my personal fashion sense in my line of work.

“And *I* would like to live in *your* building!” I replied.

The one-liner made her laugh and eased any tension. We weren’t in competition. “Come on,” I said, “let’s look. I will lead the way, because it is very bewildering. We’ll go slow, and you don’t have to feel compelled to buy anything.”

We set out from my cozy office, blessedly hidden away at the end of a long corridor of dressing rooms in a nondescript corner of the third floor. Walking the floor—which I do alone every morning before the store opens, irrespective of weather, tragedy, or sickness—is not something I like to do with clients. Unlike the singular and luxurious experience of having a whole wardrobe brought to you, doing the large, crowded floor is confusing, overwhelming, and not in any way one-on-one.

But I always walk through the store with a new client. The first meeting with anyone is something of a test run. I can get the feel of a new client’s body just by looking at the person, but to understand her personality, lifestyle, sense of color, fantasies for herself? For that I find I’m not successful unless I eyeball her in action. Our going through the floors of the store together is a lot of wasted walking time (I can do them so much faster myself, for I know all seven like the back of my hand). There is much touching and feeling of material—and talking, not just about clothes but also about what the women do for a living, how they act with their children and husbands, the depth and breadth of their social lives. I closely watch their reactions as I show them things they would never put on themselves. That is what I’m here for—to open them up to new worlds. Why else would they come to me? While I was escorting Mrs. P onto the elevator, a woman exited with a stroller that held an infant who couldn’t have been more than a few weeks old. When we got off the elevator, in rolled an elderly woman in a wheelchair pushed by an attendant. A large mix of people walk through the store, every nationality and every age, even if it is just to look. I don’t care where the person who walks in hails from—Saudi princesses or tourists from the South—they are awed. Many don’t stay. They walk in one door and directly out the next. Sometimes it worries me that the place feels too out of reach. I don’t care for that kind of snobbishness.

Mrs. P and I arrived at the second floor, which houses the luxury brands that can be found in mall stretching from Beijing to Birmingham. In general I don’t do much there. I prefer individuality to ubiquity. Strolling past a dress in glove leather by a popular Italian design house, I couldn’t help but peek at the price tag, only to roll my eyes in disgust; one drop of red pasta sauce and the wearer would

be out three thousand dollars. Mrs. P, looking as lost as a little girl in a deep forest, asked, “How do you deal with these clothes?” I pulled her away from a dress splattered with paint à la Jackson Pollock and beckoned her into the fur department, where one of the designers who had started as a furrier had become a grand dressmaker as well.

“He makes lovely clothes,” I said about the designer. “A lot of people don’t make nice clothes anymore. They use what once was lining material and call it a dress. This designer uses extravagant, beautiful fabrics, but his prices are absolutely obscene. One pays for quality.”

She held up a jacket made of white sheepskin and black leather, with monkey-fur epaulets, a misstep in an otherwise perfectly beautiful collection, as if to prove me wrong. She reminded me of a petulant child who finds the one exception to every rule.

“Let’s go up to saner clothes,” I said.

“I believe in you.”

“Don’t believe in me.”

On the fourth floor, I showed her a dress by a young American designer with a pattern of colorful bunches of flowers against a royal blue background. “It has a nice fit for your body,” I said.

“It’s awful.”

Instead Mrs. P turned to a sleeveless shell dress with matching three-quarter-length coat in elephant gray. “This I like,” she said.

“And you probably already have it in your closet. Every New York woman does. Let’s move on.”

It was becoming clear that Mrs. P wasn’t going to let go of her hang-ups without a fight. Tough cookies, however, are my specialty.

I kept moving. At a black wool cape with a dramatic, positively clerical, white collar that tied, I commented, “Isn’t this beautiful?”

“But it isn’t fun.”

Oh, I did not like this game. Not one little bit. Mrs. P veered off into a boutique I don’t frequent very often, a society designer too mundane for my taste in his overuse of sparkles, feather, and tulle.

“My mother loved feathers,” I reminisced out loud at the sight of a dress trimmed with white feathers around the neckline. “Wherever she went, she left a trail of them. Feathers are not my favorite. I like birds, but not feathers.”

Mrs. P took a sparkly black blouse off the rack and said, “This is like a white horse—you could take it anywhere.”

It was gracious and feminine in its round neck and it had sleeves. A miracle!

“It’s actually very pretty,” I said, putting the garment over my arm to bring back to my dressing room. “Now let’s leave this department.”

Mrs. P protested, to which I said, “Well then, you don’t need me. You can just shop at the store.”

Stomping her foot, she said, “I don’t want to spend the time. I want you to do it for me!”

While I kid by calling myself a “clerk,” I am pleased to be of help whether it’s to hunt for a wedding dress or just to provide a diversion for an hour. At times, however, when I deal with difficult women—those who let me *know* they’re spending money, for instance—I put my foot down. If not I get run over and killed. I am most definite about how I work. Mrs. P and I needed to gather a few items to whet her appetite and then return to the dressing room. Otherwise we were headed for a tantrum.

I pulled a sumptuous cashmere turtleneck with an interesting block print by a brand that, having begun as a manufacturer of fabric in Italy’s Lake Como, still took pride in craftsmanship. Its extravagant materials are what fabrics were like when I entered this business. “Just feel it,” I said. “It has a European flair.”

“I want to be very simple. I don’t want to be cluttered.”

“Try it on so we don’t have to go through this next time,” I said, and laid the sweater on top of the sparkly shirt.

My next find, a cherry red wool dress with puffed bracelet sleeves, went over a little better. It seemed that Mrs. P, like so many others, needed a firm hand.

“That’s not bad,” she said.

“The color is nice.”

“This is an education.”

“This is a dream.”

We moved quickly through peplum skirts and swirling prints, sheaths and leather, to add a cropped tuxedo jacket, a round-necked jacket with a ruffle front, and a charcoal knit top to our collection. It was a small pull, but Rome wasn’t built in a day, and neither should a wardrobe be.

On our way to the elevator, we cut through the shoe department, a very confusing department with each pair of shoes more unattractive than the next. A platform bootie in red water snake under a spotlight looked like an artifact on display from an ancient culture that took perverse pleasure in deforming people’s feet. A leopard-print stiletto with a heel topping out at six inches, on a platform as well, would have made a drag queen blush. Whenever I walked behind women wearing these shoes, which was unfortunately quite often, I was struck by the strange, Frankenstein-like gait they produce. Legs in these shoes simply can’t support the height and weight.

“Hello, ladies,” I said to a line of salesgirls buried in their phones. “You look like you’re waiting for the bus.”

Even though they weren’t the type to respond, they were scared to death *not* to. My age has earned me that deference at least. After they squeaked out a few hellos, they quickly returned to their light world.

Back on the third floor, I ran smack into a pair of palazzo pants, swingy and patterned with large tropical flowers made bolder by a black background. Where had those been hiding? It was sort of a wild idea. Not for Mrs. P (the tiny woman would have drowned in them), but for my tailored client coming later in the day. They were unlike anything she had ever looked at, but I just had a feeling about them. They reminded me of the luaus, the balmy romance, and the feminine dressing I’d seen on my Hawaiian honeymoon a hundred years ago. I draped them over my free arm.

Back in my quiet corner of the store, I took a moment to tuck the palazzo pants into the lineup, placing them at the end—risks always come last. Then I went to the next-door dressing room to deal with Mrs. P.

First I slipped the tuxedo jacket on her—jackets are the easiest place to start, not least of all because one doesn’t need to get undressed to try them on.

“That’s pretty,” I said.

“I don’t like the way it fits in the back of the neck,” she said, tugging at her collar like someone being pulled offstage. Sometimes it’s a wonder I don’t drink at work.

“I guess you’re used to couture clothes,” I said, removing the jacket and placing it outside the dressing room.

I approached her with the turtleneck, but she lost her nerve.

“I can’t wear turtlenecks. I get way too hot.”

I knew it was the mirror. She trained the same harsh judgment she used to quickly dispense with clothing on herself. Mrs. P was starting to panic—I had seen it a million times before—and in a complete reversal of her previously negative pose wanted to buy the red dress and the sparkly top still on their hangers, without trying either of them.

“Oh, no, I don’t sell clothes like that,” I said.

“They’ll be perfect.”

“How do you know until you put them on your body?”

~~I got the dress over her head. After thirty-eight years of doing this, nobody zips or buttons faster.~~

“How does it feel here?” I asked, patting her on the hips, knowing full well how it felt.

“Not good. It’s awful. My rear end is sticking out.”

I took the dress off and put on the sparkly shirt, which was very becoming. The silver sequins complemented her bob.

“It’s not exactly me,” Mrs. P said.

“You don’t always want to look like you. . . . It’s beautiful with your hair.”

“What about this?” she said, pointing to her neck, angry at the signs of its age. “I think the scoop neck is too much with *this*. My legs are the only part left that’s any good.”

Mrs. P looked at herself again and then turned to my reflection to ask, “What do you think?”

What do you think? I’m asked this question constantly. Even the new clients who arrive with very assured thoughts about their likes and dislikes wind up deferring to me in the end.

Mrs. P, so tough and critical on the outside and so desperate on the inside, came to me because she said she was sick of holding on to the past. Confronting her long-gone youth through a closetful of couture clothes that were making her unhappy—and yet, inside my dressing room, she couldn’t let go. Of her youth, her couture clothes, her mother. I made up my mind that I wouldn’t sell her anything, not this time. We still had more work to do—at a later date.

“What I think is the next time I’m the boss,” I said, putting an arm around her tiny frame.

“Everything will be compiled and ready for you, whether you like it or not.”

I escorted Mrs. P back to the elevator (I spend so much time in the elevator I should wear a red carnation in my lapel) and down to the basement for some makeup. It’s a must with me to make each woman I deal with, regardless of what shape or look she is, leave my clutches feeling different from when she entered, even if it is only through a new shade of lipstick.

Having dispatched Mrs. P, I had no sooner returned to my office when my tailored client plopped her sizable purse on my love seat. After a quick catch-up about her husband (long-suffering), the dog (ditto), and the apartment (like the store, forever under renovation), we set to work.

I slipped a double-breasted blue cashmere jacket on first to warm her up.

“Quite gorgeoso,” she said.

I put it to one side and followed it up with something more challenging: a white dress with polka dots and a black plant pattern that emanated from the bottom as if it were growing up from the hem.

“It’s the year of the print,” I said. “You just have to close your eyes and pray.”

Before she had a chance to zip the zipper all the way, I was pulling it down. With as many changes of clothes as I’ve seen, I know these things immediately.

“No, take it off.”

“I liked it on the hanger,” she protested.

“It’s too broadening. All you need is a frame and you’ll look like a botanical picture.”

A draped woven-crepe dress in black was just as bad.

“Oh, God, please, you look like you’re in a shroud,” I said. “Off!”

“Well, you’re certainly not out to sell anything,” she replied.

I brought forth a pink suit whose deep, saturated color I could tell intrigued but also unsettled her.

“Whose is it?” she asked.

“It looks like an old Saint Laurent jacket,” I said, then told her the name on the label.

“What size is this?” she asked while pulling up the skirt.

“It doesn’t matter.”

She twirled in front of the mirror. “This looks like me but more festive, me but in a wilder color!” she said.

You but happier, I thought.

~~“It’s good for the luncheon regardless of weather. It could be cold, or we could have a heat wave,”~~ offered.

“Could I wear black pearls?” she asked.

“Beautiful,” I replied.

Success emboldened my client. She truly was starting to feel good and relaxed, which is not easy in this city or this life.

“You know that flowered dress you sold me last year?” she said. “Everybody loves me in that dress. You can throw it in a shopping bag, and out it comes crisp and ready to wear. I get so many compliments whenever I put it on.”

Hearing that always makes me feel good. Now, with the luncheon dress a reality, it was on to the vacation problems, but first I added a few structured shirts I thought were to her taste, including an oxford-cloth point-collar shirt with long sleeves.

“I’m wavering,” she said, looking at herself in it.

“Don’t. You have to like it instantly. Nothing gets better the more times you look in the mirror. I agree—it looks like your husband’s pajama top. Off!”

The next was a paisley-and-geometric-pattern silk blouse.

“This I love.”

“You are now in a different ballpark. That’s *très élégante*.”

The designer I had pulled the blouse from was very popular this season. Still, I didn’t like the entire collection. I never do; I glean individual pieces from many collections.

“The paisley pattern is vintage,” I said.

“How do you know?”

“I know because I’m old. I remember the original.”

“What would you wear with it?”

“Black pants.”

“Tucked in or out?”

“Both.”

I placed the silk blouse beside the suit, which was separate from the blue cashmere jacket that I would most likely talk her out of in the end. The definite noes that I hung outside the fitting room had already been spirited away by Emily, my assistant.

We disagreed over a blue-and-white cotton trapeze shirt.

“You have to take this off,” I begged.

“But I think it’s cute.”

“No, no. Children will talk behind their hands about you.”

“Does it come smaller?”

I threw my hands up in the air. “It probably does,” I said, turning to Helen, the fitter who had just arrived with her pins and scissors in a clear plastic Birkin-style bag. “Please take up the cuff on the blouse while I look for this terrible blouse.”

I zipped to the department where I had found the blouse in the first place, and wouldn’t you know my luck? In a store with very few sizes, of course they had it in a size smaller.

“Here’s your favorite blouse,” I said when I returned.

“I know I’ll wear it.”

“Well, it’s cotton at least. This is the easy part for you. We haven’t gotten into the nitty-gritty part of the fitting.”

That meant pants. After my client squirmed through a pair of ill-fitting capris and stretch pants that made her feel like her “granddaughter,” she started asking for her security blanket. “Any Chanel

jackets floating around?" she asked demurely. It might have been an exorbitantly priced blanket, but blanket it was nonetheless. A cloak behind which to disappear. She has so many of them she could have filled a warehouse.

"You have enough Chanel jackets," I said.

"It's been a couple of seasons. I'm going through withdrawal."

Is the customer always right? Not in this case, but still I went back down to the second floor and gagged as I pulled a Chanel bouclé jacket in red, white, and blue with silver buttons.

"It fits me perfectly," she said.

"Do you *really* want to look like this?" She was not going to make such an insecure and costly purchase on my watch.

"I guess not."

I rushed the jacket out of the fitting room before she could reverse herself again and used the moment of confrontation to push her boundaries all the way, revealing the palazzo pants. She paled and shook her head no.

"Just for the fun of it, try them. It's an experiment."

After years of our working together, she knew I wasn't going to take no for answer. She slowly picked up the black silk pants as if they were slimy. But as she buttoned them and found the courage to raise her head to the mirror, I saw the light go on.

"These are adorable! And comfortable!"

She loved herself in them. It was as plain as day. But she wanted to know what to wear with them. While all they needed was a casual white shirt (Brooks Brothers makes the best non-iron in cotton—the collars stay crisp), I couldn't send her home without a complete outfit. If I didn't find the missing piece of the puzzle, she would never have the courage to put them on after they entered her closet. The door of my office is where I draw the line. I'm not part of the package—I don't go home with the pants.

I left her swishing around happily in her palazzo pants and went through the third floor yet again. Perhaps I had missed something. I passed a fashion victim in a short black minidress with pink polka dots and a ruffled skirt, carrying a big tote emblazoned with a designer logo. Too many people wear a label rather than what is becoming. I grabbed a slouchy sweater out of desperation.

Back in the dressing room, the neck of the sweater was too high and made my client's bosom look matronly, which turned her divine pants into clown pants. I got the sweater off before she had a chance to get a complex from looking in the mirror and was off again, but not before Emily stopped me: A young designer was on the phone.

"I need vodka," said the brilliant designer of true one-of-a-kind clothing, who was in the middle of a trunk show for the store. I recently put one of my clients into an exquisite three-quarter-length coat of his with crystals he affixed to the front but not the back. Why? Who knows? The inconsistency is what I love.

I had to let him down—no vodka in my office, although I do understand how this business can drive you to drink.

Into the elevator and up to five, I revisited a collection that I like because of its chic, clean lines and the fact that it's made in America, which is extremely important to me (I try to sell it every chance I can). But the fit is not easy; all the clothes run very small. That would not do for the woman patiently waiting.

I went up and down the escalators and in and out of the fitting room until I could not contemplate those palazzo pants for another minute (I, too, have my limits). I had to send my forlorn client home without the pants but told her not to worry: I, who do not know the meaning of the word "satisfaction" never give up. I would hold on to them and, rest assured, find something that would suit her perfectly.

Another day, another time, I would try again and see things differently. I find that once I have cleared my head, I'm game for a new beginning. I am like the doctor: You confide in him, he diagnoses you, and then, when your time is up, he's on to the next case! Over the years I have learned how to turn away from the patient and move on. There is a cutoff period to my involvement, but with me at least one gets an hour or two.

CHAPTER

One

In the 1930s, the South Side of Chicago was filled with good things: a dubonnet dress trimmed in white piqué; snowballs made from the inside of angel food cake hand-scooped out and rolled in homemade marshmallow and fresh coconut; the dining-room table set by Mother with china, silverware, starched linens, and an abundance of fruit and flowers; shopping at Kiddy Kicks, where an X-ray machine was used to fit shoes and make sure you were getting your money's worth; the vegetable peddler's heavily accented song floating up from his horse-drawn wagon to the third floor and through the window of my bedroom, where, awake but still, I dared not move until my nursemaid let me know it was time to rise.

Morning was easy, particularly because I always laid my clothes out the night before. They were a cheery greeting. My Best & Co. blouse hanging from the wardrobe was ironed using a special small board for the puff sleeves alone, so that they wouldn't get creases. Its Peter Pan collar, which came on and off with fasteners for easy washing, was a snowy white. The topstitched knife pleats of a brown gingham skirt I chose as a well-suited companion had been pressed to razor sharpness. My patent-leather Mary Janes, the ones that required a buttonhook to fasten, had been treated with Vaseline, then buffed to a high shine with a cloth.

And how good everything smelled! Our laundress, Isabelle, came every Friday to boil our clothes in a huge tin vat in the basement, where I intently watched her cook starch on a burner and stir the water with a wooden spoon. From the deep creases in her black skin, I figured her to be about a hundred years old. After she was done with the washing, all the laundry went into the backyard, adjacent to the alley, where it hung on the clothesline even in a light rain. Once the linens were washed, the sheets were put through a machine called a mangle, and the rest ironed by hand. Then she folded and tied them together with moire ribbons before they were returned to the linen closet. When I climbed into bed on a cool evening, my sheets gave off a heavenly aroma of starch, sun, and lavender sachets.

My perfectly pressed and polished outfit helped with the "school stomachs" I suffered. A new teacher, a hard assignment, or any change in my daily activities threw me into delirium and often made breakfast intolerable. The dreaded cream of wheat, toast, and orange juice that awaited me had to be consumed on pain of a tap from the switch of my nurse, Nora. Very strict and very Irish, she believed that children cleaned their plates. To that end she plucked a twig off a tree in the park, removed the bark to reveal its supple green inside, and made it whistle if any food lingered.

There wasn't any reason to worry; I never had problems at school. The teachers liked me. In fact, ~~was often referred to as the teacher's pet by the other children. But while I was a diligent student, I suspect that the label had more to do with how well dressed I was sent to school.~~ My mother, Carol, had excellent taste. Whether it was a Lanz dirndl with a ruffled white blouse, a royal blue bodice, and a sweetly contrasting apron or a Tyrolean sweater with silver buttons, she made sure all my clothes were nice. My father, Harry Stoll—who worked for his uncle running a chain of fur departments before becoming president of the Chicago department store Mandel Brothers—had had a gray squirrel coat with big round buttons and a Peter Pan collar custom-made for me when I was five.

It was the Great Depression, and yet I never remember wanting for anything. I guessed I was the most privileged child in elementary school, because not only did I have beautiful clothes but I also brought the best lunches in my pail: yummy sandwiches, homemade cookies, and fresh fruit. But I had no idea how privileged I was, since my parents and their friends, all part of the well-to-do Hyde Park Jewish community, didn't talk about money. Mostly of German heritage and entirely irreligious, this insular community didn't call the clergy at its high Reform temple "Rabbi" but rather "Doctor." Services at Congregation Sinai were a once-a-year affair on the High Holy Days for my family, and I had never heard of a bar mitzvah. Ours was a proud cultural and intellectual tradition that wholeheartedly embraced the lushness of Christmas.

Mother might have had to be dragged to temple, but she went all out for Christmas, preparations for which began in September with a trip to the gift show to buy her wrapping paper. The sunroom became the most exciting room in the house from October through December, as she filled it with enough Christmas materials to rival Santa's workshop. My mother turned wrapping each and every present (and there were a lot of them) into a grand art. She even went so far as to dip the tips of plastic straws in gold sealing wax and tie them in the middle so that they popped open to look like a huge, magnificent chrysanthemum. That was only one element of the production. There was also the cookie baking that started in November. Mother sent to Dallas, Texas, for the elaborate forms for our sugar cookies, which, along with fruitcakes, handmade popcorn trees, and lebkuchen—German gingerbread snowy with confectioners' sugar—were gifted to friends.

Mother never cooked—she was too busy smoking—but we always had the most marvelous food. Like all her friends who were married to doctors, lawyers, retailers, and business owners, she didn't work but ran a household maintained by competent persons. In our apartment on the top floor of 1211 Madison Park, we had a cook and a second girl, who for seven dollars a week lived in, sharing the large maid's room outfitted with two Murphy beds. (On Thursday nights, the cook's day off, we delighted in a Chinese-food feast pedaled over from a small local shop.)

My mother wasn't a terrific eater. She was basically an eater of sweets, though she wouldn't admit to it. Our cook, Martha, who had a terrible drinking problem but was a divine baker, filled Mother's afternoon coffee klatches with schnecken, German sticky buns, and fragrant cinnamon toast that complemented the warm and civilized low part of the day. As sure as four o'clock came every afternoon, so did the rolling tray.

Daddy, on the other hand, loved food so much that he couldn't walk into a grocery store without practically buying out the place. He never met a double lamb chop he didn't adore. Although he was diabetic and supposed to restrict his diet, how many courses we consumed at home! Every night the candelabra illuminated a blue-and-white china relish tray whose compartments were filled with bread and chutney, cottage cheese, celery, carrot sticks, olives, and our own bread-and-butter pickles. We did a lot of pickling in the fall, and the big crocks of brine and marinating Kirby cucumbers sat in the pantry throughout the year. Once we sat down, out came soup, hot bouillon or cream of mushroom garnished with a dollop of whipped cream, and egg timbales. Sometimes herring, in sour cream or German style with beets.

A natural lefty, I found it awkward when the main course of meat, vegetable, and potatoes was served from a large silver tray on my left by the maid. Although my teachers at school allowed me to write with my left hand, at home I was taught how to serve myself and eat with my right. I struggled through many meals until I mastered using a fork in my left hand and knife in the right. Etiquette demanded nothing less.

There was always bread on the table, homemade yeast rolls accompanied by butter balls rolled to the right consistency with wooden paddles and topped grandly with a piece of parsley.

To round it off, dessert. Profiteroles with custard, rhubarb-and-strawberry pies, baked apples with sour cream, homemade cookies—linzer cookies, sandies, butter cookies—really anything as long as wasn't store-bought. Heaven forbid. Even though my father's diabetes prevented him from truly indulging in candy or sweets (though he was known to ruin a perfectly good box of chocolates or a beautiful cake by plunging his hand into it for just a fingerful), he wouldn't tolerate anything less than homemade.

Once at a dinner party at a friend's home, Father took a dig at the quality of the dessert served. "In our home we don't serve cake from Askow's," he teased the hostess, referring to a popular Hyde Park bakery and embarrassing all.

No one would ever have accused my father of being easy. His photographic memory and obsessive newspaper-reading habit resulted in encyclopedic knowledge and confidence that provided a lot of ammunition for arguments. He spoke his mind whenever and however it directed him. Indeed, my father was *the* only Republican of all their friends. In the 1936 presidential election, Franklin D. Roosevelt received more than 95 percent of the vote in the Jewish 24th Ward, leading the president to call it "the best ward in the whole country." Father, so devoted a Republican that when he died my mother received a letter from President Nixon, truly loathed President Roosevelt.

Mother—my brilliant father's intellectual peer, who was loved by many and feared by even more for her caustic tongue—saved the mortified hostess who'd made the awful mistake of serving bakery cake by giving it right back to him.

"Well, Harry, at least they don't wear short sleeves to dinner," she said, rolling her big blue eyes and breaking the tension.

Mother was referring to his peccadillo regarding long sleeves, which he hated so much he had them removed. Mother bought him beautiful shirts from A. Sulka & Company, only to discover when he lifted his arms at a dinner party to cut his prime rib that his cuffs had disappeared. No matter that the shirts came from the preeminent haberdashery, whose loyal customers included the likes of the Duke of Windsor, Clark Cable, Gary Cooper, and countless Rockefellers. He had all their sleeves lopped off.

Clothes were never a big part of Father's agenda. My mother was forever coaxing him into buying a new suit, but the extent to which my father shopped involved sneaking into Abercrombie & Fitch to buy the same coat with raglan sleeves he'd owned in another tweed and Brooks Brothers for light blue button-down shirts (of course with the sleeves off) that he felt were perfectly fine for all occasions—even fancy dinners and business meetings.

While he wasn't crazy about clothes, he did love his heavy, dark brown British cordovans, which he kept at a high shine. Whatever train station, airport, club, or man on the street he happened upon, he stopped to have his shoes shined. Many a shoeshine boy was tipped very highly. He also owned one of the very first automatic shoe polishers, in which an electrically powered soft red ball rotated and buffed the shoes. He simply adored a perfect shine. I think it made him feel tall, thin, and very well dressed.

His love of shoes over clothes might have stemmed from his weight problem (after all, no matter how heavy you get, a new pair of shoes will always fit). He refused to take insulin, opting to control his diabetes by dieting. Daddy's weight went up and down like a yo-yo. Periodically he restricted

himself to consommé and coffee, proudly demonstrating how much he'd lost by the newly freed hole in his belt. Then he went back to gorging on triple-cut lamb chops. Even his cordovans couldn't trum a good meal. He managed to get through all of World War II in only two pairs, because my mother traded our shoe rations to Mr. Kline, the butcher, so we could get Father his lamb chops and maybe a nice roast beef.

Whether because of my father's appetite or my mother's good hiring, our house always smelled as if we were expecting the doorbell to ring. And more often than not, it did. My very social mother and father had a lot of parties where there was lots of good food, lots of drinking, lots of screaming.

Dressed for bed, I silently watched the raucous cocktail hours where plenty of highballs, martinis, and even the occasional manhattan were consumed. People say Jewish people don't drink. Well, these did. I marveled at the glamour of my mother and her friends having a merry old time in their strapless dresses with brooches pinned to the cleavage. (Nowadays everybody under fifty wants to be nude and everyone over fifty covered up like a nun. Whenever I put a strapless evening dress on an older client and hear, "Oh, no, no, no. I have to have sleeves," I remember all the bosoms and arms of those voluptuous women of my childhood.)

After cocktails the party moved to the dining room, where the table was covered in one of my mother's beautiful linens. Mother adored table linens, which she purchased from a man who came to the city once a year with stock specially ordered from Europe. They were embroidered often with flowers, sometimes fruits, in many colors. The theme was carried out in two Steuben horn vases at each end of the table and a large boat-size vessel in the middle filled with flowers or fruit or both, which my mother arranged herself. Every night we ate on linen place mats with matching napkins, but organdy cloths were for big parties.

While the guests started on egg timbales topped with caviar, I snuck into the butler's pantry to sip the dregs of the leftover cocktails collected by the maids. Naughty girl. With the pleasant warm feeling spreading from my chest to my head, I returned to my usual industrious self, darting in between the kitchen and cold pantry to help the cook and the second girl get the huge filet of beef with fresh mushrooms; asparagus with hollandaise sauce; and salad of persimmon, watercress, and homemade French dressing out to the table. I, in pajamas and robe, dutifully shadowed the second girl in her black uniform and organdy apron, until the last of the strawberries Romanoff or swan-shaped meringues that held ice cream and butterscotch sauce (another favorite) had been cleared.

Although the members of the dinner party cooed at the cuteness of my playing maid, for me this was no game. The kinship I felt to the people who worked in our house went far above what I felt for many of my parents' friends. My upbringing, strict and sheltered, demanded that I be seen and not heard, always correct. A life of quiet discipline. As an only child in an often-empty house, I took shelter in the cook and the second girl's gossip about boyfriends or groused over the guests my father invited to dinner without notice. As cakes baked and sauces thickened, I, a small girl who looked like an angel in precious outfits, listened silently without giving any trouble whatsoever. Little pitchers have big ears.

The warmth and camaraderie meant I spent most of my youth in the kitchen, but there was another place with an opposite form of protection that had the same strong pull. I found a wholly different companionship in closets, which offered up their private comfort for an endless game of dress-up.

I began in the closet of my dear, chain-smoking nana, whom we visited every Sunday afternoon. It was the highlight of my week: Auntie Mill, Auntie Emmy, and other ladies gathered over strong coffee and delicious coffee cake to dish on their grown children and husbands, reverting to their native German when the conversation became unsuitable for little-girl ears.

My mother's mother provided the spiciest content herself. While her sister, my great-aunt Corrine who wore her waist-length hair in a regal coronet braid twisted around her head and had the most

incredible collection of glass paperweights, was the beauty, my square and nearsighted nana did very well with the men (particularly her type—married doctors).

She was spunky, and loved men back, though it was hard to imagine her ever having loved my grandfather, who had divorced her and married his Christian Scientist secretary, Lenore, just like in the movies. You took your good manners to see my maternal grandfather, Sigmund Freshman, a stern man who in the mid-1920s had produced with his brother Charles a radio called the Freshman Masterpiece. For many American families, it was their first radio, because it cost only \$60—also available as a kit for only \$17.50! While competing radios went for \$75 to \$150, the Freshman's low price was attributed to the tough, if not ruthless, methods the brothers used to drive costs down. (In our home we had much grander radios, lovely consoles that were nearly pieces of furniture, and we listened constantly to *Your Hit Parade*, *Fibber McGee and Molly*, Hans von Kaltenborn reading the news, and, best of all, soap operas like *The Guiding Light*.)

My visits consisted of my grandfather's chauffeur, Otis, a southern black gentleman in a peaked cap, leather gauntlets, and a gray uniform that matched the gray car, delivering me to the restaurant in the apartment-hotel where my grandfather lived with Lenore, where I sat very straight and quiet for the duration of the meal, because Papa did *not* like girls who wiggled.

Nana, a cigarette forever hanging out of her mouth, was worlds away. She wasn't like any other grandmothers I knew. She was fun and expansive—she didn't go out and about a lot but liked to travel to Europe and Hot Springs, Arkansas (mostly on her alimony)—and she was far from perfect. Her hair, which she kept blond, was the bane of her existence, so she changed styles from week to week, which I found terribly exciting. But what she never changed were the peignoirs she wore on her 1890 figure at all hours of the day and night.

During the Sunday coffee klatches, I faded into the background of disapproving clucks, clinking cups, and the rich smell of coffee. Then I happily disappeared into her closet.

Secluded in my own world, the ladies' clacking reduced to a comforting murmur, I opened the doors of an armoire to reveal Nana's impressive collection of negligees (my mother bought new ones for her wherever she went shopping). My chest thrilled at the image of all those slinky, silky things. Pearly cream, moody silver, petal pink, they hung in perfect array like impractical soldiers. After running my hand over the delicious materials, I pulled one out by instinct: a white silk negligee that zipped up to an accordion-pleat top.

In my game of dress-up, there was never any plan or story line. My nana's negligees recalled the seductive screen sirens of the day, but I wasn't pretending to be Carole Lombard, Joan Crawford, or Norma Shearer. Mine was the methodical enjoyment of an only child. I didn't even bother too much with the mirror—in fact, I really dislike mirrors of all kinds and am known for leaving the house with my buttons askew and my clothes inside out. The pleasure was simply getting into the garment and seeing what happened. The game was wearing this and that, sensing how the silhouette slimmed with twisted rope belt or the hem seemed to lengthen with Nana's satin boudoir mules. The game was putting it all on.

The game was also private. I never would have thought to parade out before my nana and my aunties, and although they knew what I was up to, I would have been mortified to be caught in the act. Similarly, as soon as my mother went out for the evening, I went straight into *her* closet.

Inside my parents' bedroom, she had two enormous walk-in closets where everything was tidy, tucked away, and inviting. There was soft carpeting underfoot and the smell of lily of the valley in the air, my mother's scent. The dresses hung on one side and blouses and skirts on the other, divided by a marble-topped dresser with delicate perfume bottles and atomizers gathered on a mirrored tray. Inside its fabric-lined drawers, all manner of treasures nestled: stockings, underwear, and scarves. I inhaled lily of the valley and Joy from empty bottles she kept deep in her drawers after using up all the

perfume.

A staggering number of kid gloves lay immaculate in a “glove drawer,” as though my mother had just bought them and not worn them to drive, have lunch at the Drake Hotel, or go shopping at Marshall Field’s. Even the white kid dinner gloves looked new, thanks to their rigorous cleaning regimen in which they were gently rubbed with a washrag doused with cleaning fluid to remove spots blown into, periodically turned on a Turkish towel to dry, then smoothed down.

My mother’s robes took up quite a bit of space. She loved them as much as Nana did her negligees. The minute Mother was in the door, off came her clothes and on went a dressing gown. The lovely ones were worn to dinner. The wraps were for lying down or after the bath.

I trod lightly when I came to her handkerchief boxes for hankies made by nuns living just outside Chicago. Ribbons kept the intricately embroidered quilted satins, taffetas, and linens pressed together nice and flat—and who was I to destroy all of Isabelle’s precious handiwork? Separately, large grosgrain ribbon similarly kept packets of six folded nightgowns. The firm order of so many delicate things made an enormous impression on me.

The one area I ignored was hats—although it wasn’t easy, since there were so many. My mother and her hats. She adored and wore all manner of them, from fedoras with great big feathers to doll hats with small veils of nylon netting. Many were made by Bes-Ben, run by the fanciful milliner Benjamin B. Green-Field, otherwise known as “Chicago’s Mad Hatter.” One would never have suspected that a man so uninhibited in his use of lobsters, clocks, firecrackers, skyscrapers, doll furniture, and even cigarette packages to decorate his hats was the son of an ironworker. From such humble beginnings, he created a business with his sister Bessie that catered to celebrities such as Lucille Ball and Marlene Dietrich, as well as all of Chicago society. His strange and quirky little hats were perfect for Mother. Changing with the seasons, she wore a cloche covered in cherries with her mink in December and a confection of silk flowers that looked like a wedding centerpiece on her head for spring. My father, crazy for Mother in chapeaus, encouraged her purchases, even though the hats at Mr. Green-Field’s shop on posh North Michigan Avenue started at a pricey \$37.75 and went all the way up to an insane \$1,000. (Mr. Green-Field was no snob, however. Every summer he held a midnight sale where hat lovers could buy his creations for as little as \$5 until 2:00 A.M., when he began simply tossing them out the front door to committed bargain hunters.)

My mother became known for her hats, but I was never tempted by the hatboxes piled to the ceiling. I hated wearing them, more than anything else in the whole wide world. I loathed anything on my head. Felt, wool, even the silk of the babushkas that all the girls my age wore made me feel claustrophobic. As a small child, I tried to ease off the dreaded heavy knit hat that my nurse, Nora, outfitted me in for winter walks to school. But she pulled it down hard over my ears to make sure it stayed. (When everyone was wearing fur hats in the 1950s, I had a sable one made and wore it a few times. The exorbitantly luxurious fur didn’t change anything, and the old hate came back. The poor thing still sits captive and unworn in a see-through hatbox on the highest shelf in my closet.)

I tried on everything else of Mother’s and walked around, imitating her as best I could. I loved how my mother looked. Her taste was superb, even when times weren’t great. In addition to her unique hats, she wore scarves when others didn’t. And the way she threw a fur boa over the masculine suits that were stylish at the time put her own imprint on a popular look. With her expressive blue eyes, red lipstick, lean figure, and personal flair, I thought my mother always dressed the best.

I loved to watch her put it all together. With the logs crackling in the wood-burning fireplace in their bedroom, she got ready for an evening out while I sat at attention on one of the two huge blue-and-white sofas and Daddy stretched out on his bed with the newspaper. He had plenty of time to relax, since he didn’t need very long to pull on short sleeves and a suit.

Playing dress-up in my mother’s closet was not as much about being in her clothes as it was being

with her. I was gifted so many good and beautiful things. Still, what I wanted above all else was to be with my mother. But she and my father weren't home a lot.

Daddy, a workaholic, traveled all the time for business. He always seemed to be taking the Broadway Limited back and forth between New York and Chicago or catching a ride on a mail plane to even farther-flung places. When he was at home, my mother picked him up most every night, because that's the only way we got him home. When she bundled me (in my pajamas, after my bath) into the car to drive downtown with her, it was the biggest thrill of my life. I'd been released from jail if only for a night.

That excitement, however, paled in comparison to the times when Mother picked me up at school to run errands! She at the wheel and I by her side, we careened past the shops of Fifty-third Street, Hyde Park's shopping district several blocks north of the University of Chicago campus, stopping first at the butcher, where chickens (later to be our dinner) kept in a pit outside the store squawked at our arrival. The unevenness of the sawdust that dusted the white tile floor felt good underfoot. Mr. Kline, frenching the bones of a slab of pork ribs for a crown roast, put down his slender silver boning knife when he saw us walk through the door. All weapons were useless against Mother.

After deciding that what truly looked the best were the tournedos of beef, although she'd been hoping for five-inch sirloin steaks, and reluctantly accepting a pound of unctuous sweetbreads as a gift from Mr. Kline, we were off to my most favorite store—the Italian grocery, where my love of everything green began. Tony, an awfully kind man who adored my mother and me, showered us with hidden delights. He held out a basket filled with the bright pods of fresh lima beans for my mother and a tissue-wrapped bunch of Concord grapes as pretty as any bridal bouquet for me. Pride swept across his face as he saw my mother's reaction of joy at the sight of his persimmons. (I do think he was in love with her.)

The butcher, the grocer, the baker, and the florist—shopping was not one-stop. It took forever, pinching and poking everything, politely answering questions, and accepting little gifts of a macaroon or an apple. I was in no rush, though; the attenuation of every minor transaction meant a longer reprieve from the rigidity of home.

While I would happily have shopped with my mother for cream of wheat, true heaven was a trip to Marshall Field's. It was impossible not to feel fancy as soon as you arrived in the Loop and glimpsed the department store that took up all of its State Street block (at the time it was the second-largest store in the world after Macy's at Herald Square). That was just the start of the grandeur. Inside, the Tiffany mosaic ceiling, an iridescent trinity of blue ovals surrounded by swirling hues of gold, capped a six-floor atrium in the jaw-dropping manner of a Byzantine church.

The mosaic of hundreds of thousands of handmade pieces of glass wasn't at all an outsize gesture. At least not in my book. Marshall Field's was no ordinary store, but a wonder of the world, a civic institution, a temple of quality! Once surrounded by the ground floor's dark-stained wood, marble floors, and white Corinthian columns that were grand enough for Cinderella's ball, you could find anything. Replacement bags for a Hoover vacuum or a Mikimoto cultured-pearl necklace. *Anything*.

Any day I got a whiff of the cocoa, Oregon peppermint, and butter wafting down from the large melting pots on the thirteenth floor that produced Frango mint meltaway chocolates was a good day. But if I were really lucky, Mother would take me for lunch and a fashion show in the Walnut Room, where the Great Tree dripped with lights over diners during Christmas. It was oh so glamorous in the massive wood-paneled dining room where Austrian chandeliers glittered overhead.

At our table for two, I took boundless delight in my usual order, the Field's Special Sandwich, a wonder in itself with a piece of buttered rye topped with Swiss cheese, turkey, iceberg lettuce wedges, more turkey, enough Thousand Island dressing to puddle around the plate, bacon, tomato, egg, parsley sprigs, and, lastly, a stuffed green olive. Mother, though, hardly broke the crust of her chicken potpie

preferring instead thoughtful drags on her cigarette. We made some small talk, what I imagined to be the regular gab of ladies who lunch, but mostly I watched her large blue eyes take in the fashions on the runway as the models paraded around our table.

I saw how other people looked at and talked about Mother, who was the opposite of staid or housewifey. She always ran a good house, because she had good help, but she never did housework. Instead she was front captain among her circle of friends and beyond. There was no doubt about it. Mother did all sorts of pacifying when her friends were fighting among one another. She took them to buy clothes and to have abortions. How many and how often, I had no idea. My mother was very secretive about things she didn't want made known. My entire family was quite Germanic in that way. Lots of "Shhh, the baby is in the room." Still, I heard enough to know that Mother, strong-willed and take-charge, was the leader of the group in every sense.

I completely adored her, but I didn't have that much of her. I was the child left dusting and rearranging my room. That's why those grocery-shopping or Marshall Field's expeditions were very important to me. I never knew when our next excursion would be, because I didn't dare ask her. I was as frightened of her as I was in love with her. The last thing I wanted was to do anything wrong.

My mother's comings and goings weren't the only mysteries I wasn't supposed to know anything about. The other, much larger mystery was the man she was once married to, the one who was my real father. I had understood that the man I called Daddy wasn't my biological father from as early as I could remember. My real father would resurface unexpectedly out of the shadows from time to time. Other than the fact that he *was* my father, I knew very little else about him, because Mother kept the details of his identity in her pantheon of secrets and Daddy hated him enough that any mention of his presence was barred from our home.

Occasionally, out of the blue, he would be waiting across the street from my elementary school to pick me up, a stranger in an ordinary dark suit. I felt like I was doing something wrong. Perhaps he had told my mother he was picking me up, since I was never unattended as a child, but I was not privy to that information. Instead ours felt like a sneaky affair. When he took me out for ice cream, I felt the burden of living with a lie and a deeply shaming embarrassment. Nobody else had two fathers.

Despite my otherwise very good memory, I remember little of the visits and not much more of my father, as if my memories, too, obeyed my parents' wish to obliterate this man's existence. Tall and slim, he had overly kind brown eyes that always seemed to be filled with tears when he saw me. He had attended the University of Chicago. And both my mother and father called him "weak."

Just as no information about my real father was permitted, neither were any physical traces of him. I never had a single picture of him, and if he brought me presents during our secret meetings, I had to get rid of the evidence. The maids were my accomplices, helping me to hide the Mickey Mouse watch or the charm bracelet I came home with when I returned from one of my sneak visits.

I imagined that Mother or Daddy would be furious if either found out I'd been seeing my biological father—and had accepted a cheap gift from him! Both had epic tempers for which they were unapologetic. (After smashing an ashtray against the wall in anger, my father simply said, "We can afford another." When my mother left hairbrush marks on my arm because I didn't want to go to school, it was Nellie, my nursemaid after Nora, who cried in my room with me.)

The fear when my real father rang the bell of our apartment one night, however, was new. Paralyzed in my bed, I could hear every single sound of the altercation on the outside landing as if it were one of my programs playing on the radio. I wished I hadn't heard Daddy yelling at the man, hitting him, and the man falling down the stairs, but I was always listening. After that there were no more sneak visits or presents, as he, too, agreed to disappear.

The chronic nightmares began soon after. Everything was taken care of for me, and yet I had no control over anything, even when the adults in my life came and went. One Christmas, Mother and

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