

# Prologue

Nash. Looking good,” Mitch said. Which meant I looked like crap. I had no make-up on, I hadn’t washed my hair, and my armpits smelled like cilantro. Thinking about my armpits just made me sweat more, as I was sure Mitch would soon ask: “What’s that smell?”

I was wearing corduroy bell-bottoms, a flowered polyester shirt, and platform shoes. Mitch had a mustache, feathered blond hair, and was also wearing platform shoes. We looked like we were going to a 1970s costume party.

Except there was no party. And these weren’t costumes.

It *was* the ‘70s. 1974.

We were at the Old World Restaurant in Beverly Hills, where Mitch was the manager and I was the hostess.

Shut up,” I said. “I think I broke my finger.” I’d injured my finger earlier in a judo class at the Y, and although that didn’t stop me from showing up for work, I hadn’t been able to take a shower, and unfortunately tonight I would come face to face with the man I’d been obsessed with for the last five years.

It was a warm Sunday evening in April. I was nineteen. Listless and longing. *Bennie and the Jets* was the number one song that spring, but what made me swoon was Joni Mitchell's *Help Me*. I was always falling in love.

Although not with Mitch because he was a doofus.

The restaurant was usually slow on Sunday nights. I went to the prep station, got a plastic water glass, filled it mostly with ice, and stuck my index finger in. Holding the cup, my injured finger submerged, I seated a few people. No one asked me about the glass I was carrying around, or maybe no one noticed. It became second nature, and as the pain subsided, I soon forgot about it,

I went into the bathroom, slicked my dirty hair back into a ponytail, pinched my cheeks for color like someone from the 1920s, re-submerged my finger in the plastic glass, and came out of the bathroom.

Mitch stepped in beside me as we walked.

"Your boyfriend's up front," he said. This was his go-to comment about any guy sitting solo, young or old, as if Mitch knew I was perpetually looking for a boyfriend.

"Oh, goody," not getting my hopes up once again.

Mitch didn't reply. He just smiled.

I walked to the front of the restaurant, and holding the glass in my right hand, finger submerged, I grabbed a menu with my left hand and turned to find a man sitting alone at a table in the corner.

Warren Beatty.

I froze. My face flushed.

Dammit! Why tonight?

I had developed my secret obsession with Warren Beatty when I was fourteen—I'd even gotten the damn job at The Old World when I was eighteen as I'd been told he came in occasionally—and tonight, over a year and a half later, he *finally* comes in? I'd had it all mapped out: I would meet him, we would become lovers and eventually friends, and we'd know each other for the rest of our lives. And although I didn't have all the particulars in place, Step One in my plan had been to grow up. Check. Step Two was to meet him.

But not like this.

Warren was reading a newspaper he'd folded into a smaller rectangle, as if he was focused on something important. Or maybe he was tidy and didn't like a lot of paper flapping around. Or maybe he wanted people to see his face.

I sure wanted to see his face. He was beautiful. The most beautiful man I'd ever seen. Trying to will myself into invisibility, I placed the menu on the table as unobtrusively as I could.

"Your waiter will be right with you," I said blandly.

He looked up. "Thank you."

That voice. I was hearing that voice fifteen inches away from my face. More like my torso, as I was standing, and he was sitting. But he was expelling sounds and molecules in my direction, and they warmed me.

Until I remembered I looked like crap.

He smiled. I half-smiled and turned to walk away. My brain was misfiring all over the place: that's *him*, I'm holding this stupid glass, he'd looked at me, did I say anything to him? Or had I been rendered as mute as I now felt?

I could go upstairs and hide. I'd let Mitch handle things. This was *not* the way I wanted to meet Warren Beatty.

I'd almost met him three years before when my parents dragged me to a party in Westwood. But I knew then I was still too young, so I'd made myself invisible to him. And although I was now old enough, this had *not* been Step Two of my plan: dirty hair, no makeup, smelly armpits. I prayed he had already forgotten me. I almost made it out of the front room and out of his sight.

"Excuse me, miss?" That voice shivered down my back.

Could I just keep walking? *Let me just keep walking.*

But what if this was my only chance? I'd been waiting for Warren Beatty to come into this stupid restaurant for almost two years. I was tired of waiting. And here he was. I couldn't work here for another two years on hope.

I turned around to face him.

# 1 – Splendor In The Grass

In the 1960s, most young girls in Southern California wanted to wear training bras, get their ears pierced, and be allowed to shave their legs. Although I shared these desires and rites of passage on my way to becoming a full-fledged teenager, where I diverged was in the fantasy department. My friends idolized Gidget—innocent and approachable. I wanted to be Ann-Margret—seductive and mysterious. And where other girls had unattainable teen-idol crushes on Paul McCartney or Davy Jones, my secret desire as a young girl was for Warren Beatty.

The other girls grew out of their teenage fantasies and went on to real relationships, but I held onto mine until, well, last month. Although this obsession with Warren Beatty may have manifested when I was fourteen, the undercurrent that fed this obsession was a deep longing that had begun much earlier, growing up in a family of colorful misfits.

My dad, Dick, was a handsome and charming trombone player who flirted with everyone. And the women flirted back. My beautiful mom, Barbara, was more complex, smarter than my dad, and unsuited to being a mother and homemaker. Having a new baby and a handsome husband may have distracted her for a while, but after my brothers were born, she became tired and brittle.

Our first house was a “cracker box”—as my dad called it—on a cul-de-sac in the north end of the San Fernando Valley, beyond which was the wilderness of orange trees and walnut groves, and where the only social activities in the 1950s were having cocktails, playing bridge, and planning for a nuclear war.

Dad was just starting his career as a studio musician, so he was home a lot, and the three of us had fun on laundry day when I’d hide in the pile of dirty clothes. My mom would say, “Where’s Nikki?” and when my dad started to pick up the bundle, I’d burst out saying, “Here I am!” with an exuberance I eventually learned to temper when I noticed her responses to my need for attention changed from delight to annoyance. This need for acknowledgment would later take many forms, like being attractive or funny or seemingly smart.

Dad taught me to read, and Mom loved words, so until I could use a dictionary on my own, I turned to my mom for help. When I was five, I’d seen “fuck” and “shit” written on a cinder block wall near the railroad tracks and asked her what those words meant. She was at her sewing machine, and after hearing my question, she took her foot off the machine’s pedal but didn’t immediately answer. She was a stickler for logic, truth, and grammar, and didn’t believe words were either good or bad, except maybe socially, which to her was circumstantial and not definitive.

She took a breath and explained the biological aspects of the words I’d seen, using terms not unfamiliar to me—words we used around the house like *penis*, *vagina*, and *bowel movement*.

“Shit” was easy to explain, but “fuck” gave her pause. She explained the mechanics of the penis and vagina but pulled to do the right thing as a mother by instilling the accepted social morality

she may not have believed in, she loosely explained that when a man and a woman got together in this way, they were “most likely” married. Satisfied, I went back outside to play.

That night, my parents were playing bridge and having cocktails with three other couples. I came in and waited politely for a lull in the conversation so I could say goodnight. I heard one couple talking about when they’d gotten married, and another couple mentioned how long they’d been married.

During the lull, I asked, “Mom, how long have you and Daddy been married?”

“Six years.”

“So you’ve been fucking for six years?” I asked.

I didn’t know why their friends laughed—I was proud of my conjugation of a new verb—but my mom nodded and simply said, “Goodnight, Nikki.”

I said goodnight and went to bed.

This delightful familial attention from both my parents waned after my brothers were born, and I went from only child to oldest child. Mom’s moods were inconsistent, which confused me. Some days she seemed fine and some days she seemed mad at me for no reason. I overheard her talking to a neighbor about *The Red Shoes*—a movie she *loved*—and it caught my attention because she didn’t talk about love too often. I hadn’t seen the movie, but I had a pair of red shoes—scuffed Mary Janes—and I noticed one day while I was wearing them that she seemed to be more attentive. I wore them again the next day. Same thing. Mom was friendlier, happier. She loved me. The third day—feeling I had this figured out—I put on the red shoes, but something had shifted overnight, and when she got up late that morning, she was sullen and didn’t look at

me. I was confused and then disappointed when I realized the red shoes weren't the secret. They weren't magical. Back to the drawing board.

Whenever I got sick, my mother seemed overwhelmed and became distant. She put me alone in my room, gave me one of my dad's hankies which she'd dabbed with her perfume—Sirocco—put on a recording of the *1812 Overture*, and closed the door. Until, I guess, I felt better. Or the music stopped. I got used to being alone. And so—in an attempt to never be too much for my mom—I started paring down my needs to only the most essential, and in this way, I wouldn't annoy her; I wouldn't risk being disappointed by her absence. Instead, I developed a need to be needless. And a strange love of perfume, which continues to this day.

Dad's career was picking up, as was Mom's drinking. He was getting recording dates with Henry Mancini on movies like *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, and his reputation grew as a studio musician in television as well, working on shows like *Peter Gunn* and *Combat!*

Time for a bigger house.

I was eight and my brothers, Ted and Bill, were three and two when we left the cracker box and bomb-shelter talk and moved to a sprawling Dutch farmhouse in Tarzana, on a street with no sidewalks, as it was zoned for horses. We did not have horses. The house had a lot of brick and wood and came furnished with big sofas and old-timey flourishes like wagon-wheel lighting fixtures, a cobbler's bench coffee table, rag rugs, and flowery flounces on the curtains. It was probably a shock to my mom's esthetics as she preferred the simplicity of 1950s modern (or *moderne* as she referred to it): white walls, one stiff black couch, a slim black slatted coffee table, and one piece of abstract art on a wall.



My brothers and I, however, loved the house, and the best part for me was the canopy bed that was left behind in what would become my bedroom on the second floor. Plus, there was a pool. Dad didn't care about interior design, or perhaps he didn't notice, but he loved the pool. He loved skimming the leaves; he loved testing the chemicals, checking the vacuum that slunk around at the bottom, sucking up whatever had found its way down there. And he occasionally rescued critters. One time, a lizard had fallen into the pool, and we caught Dad standing on the shallow-end stairs in his plaid boxer shorts, giving the lizard mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, pressing gently on its belly and then blowing into its mouth. He also had about fifteen hummingbird feeders going in the backyard, filled with the sweet liquid he concocted himself. His nicknames—given to him by friends who knew these stories and witnessed his affable good nature—were either Francis of Assisi or The Saint, neither of which my mother called him, as she was otherwise engaged cleaning up all the hummingbird juice-making crap.

As Dad became better known in the music industry, the parties started. There were many drunken nights with directors, musicians, and actors, like Robert Altman (we called him Bob), John Williams (we called him Johnny), and Vic Morrow (we called him, well, Vic). There's a photo—taken at night in the backyard—where I'm wearing a peignoir set: a sheer, blue lacy nightgown and a matching chiffon robe with ruffles and silk ribbons at the neck. I guess the point of these peignoir sets was to present a woman, like on her wedding night, as a gift of sorts. First, untying the silk ribbons, slowly removing the robe to reveal the diaphanous tissue paper-like nightgown, hinting at the ultimate present just beneath the fabric, providing the new bride with the potential for a slow, sexy reveal. Maybe appropriate if you were in your twenties on your honeymoon, but I was *eight*. Why did they even make these for children?

In the peignoir photo, I'm sitting next to Vic Morrow, the star of *Combat!* It was a warm summer night in the Valley, and we were on the small, worn merry-go-round in the backyard by the pool. Vic was very handsome and very drunk, and the merry-go-round was big enough for barely two children, so we were forced to sit close together. Although I was dressed like a child bride ready for bed, it wasn't that late, and I wasn't alone with Vic. I was chaperoned to some extent as my dad was nearby with his camera, silhouetted by the pool behind him, the pool light creating an otherworldly opalescence in the otherwise dark backyard. Dad snapped the photo of me and Vic. I probably said goodnight not long after that because my parents were still strict about my bedtime (if not my attire), although I usually stayed awake a while, listening to the revelry by the pool below my bedroom window.

Bob Altman was an up-and-coming TV director and would eventually, in 1970, go on to direct his first big hit, *M\*A\*S\*H*, followed by other movies, including *The Long Goodbye*, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, and *Nashville*. But in the early '60s it was television, and in addition to directing *Combat!*, he directed three episodes of the *Kraft Suspense Theater*; from which he was fired for saying their shows were as bland as their cheese, a story my mom loved to retell. She seemed to love Bob for speaking his mind, for his fearlessness, and for saying what he wanted, as opposed to my dad, who was charming and friendly but didn't rock the boat with too many strong opinions. Or maybe he didn't have any strong opinions to express.

Mom was still beautiful and astute, but by 1968, she had started to show a weariness that came from having three kids but no mental stimulation. She still explained things to me when I asked, until her subtle depression took over, and she became less available. Dad was still handsome and charming, and enjoyed the unexpected attention from the occasional jazz jams

that took over our living room or the musician groupies that hung around the recording studios. But Mom needed more than the diffused stardust of Dad's success to lift her from the drudgery of being a silent housewife. After her dreams of being a singer were side-lined by polyps on her throat, she found her own mental stimulation and attention with politics. *Radical* politics. And with her new interest came new friends.

We were the only family on the block, as far as I could tell, to have the FBI drive slowly back and forth in front of our house. Not all the time, just when my parents had parties, and we had a lot of parties. I asked my mom why the FBI was driving by, and she explained that the government was watching us, which turned out to be true.

When the black sedan drove past, the men in suits made note of the license plates of the cars parked in our circular drive and on the street in front of our house. There were shiny cars from the wealthier part of the San Fernando Valley belonging to well-meaning, liberal ACLU types; beater cars from a variety of jazz musicians and studio musicians who came from Hollywood; and various old station wagons and vans belonging to the Black Panthers—a militant Black Power organization. There were the cars of actors and reporters, as well as a rogue door-to-door Fuller Brush man on foot who had seen all the cars and rang the doorbell, thinking someone might need some brushes or other household items. He was used to the door being closed in his face, but at our house, he was invited in and stayed for the weekend.

Every couple of weeks, this sprawling house in Tarzana came alive with music, cooking, drinking, and dancing. Everyone singing along: "Grazin' in the grass is a gas, baby, can you dig it." The speakers by the pool were often pulsing with something Brazilian like Sergio Mendes and Brazil '66. My brothers and I could probably still sing along to "Mais Que Nada." Well, not

exactly the real words, but a phonetic recreation of Portuguese we'd come up with as children, and belted out with enthusiasm if Mom was in a good mood.

Our adopted family of misfits included Brother Lenny, in a cotton dashiki, who would take over the kitchen with all his loud drinking, Kent-smoking, chitlin-cooking, and storytelling. Brother Lenny also had his hands full playing grab-ass with my mom. Bubba, an afro pick comb embedded in his hair, made jewelry, spreading out all his beads and tools on the coffee table in the living room. Uncle Larry, a tall, beautiful man who may have had an affair with my Gramma Ruth, who was as white as he was Black. The Goldmans came from Woodland Hills, looking like their name, Arnie with his gold chains and gold embellishments on his belt and shoes, Joyce with her gold hair, gold purse, and her gold check-writing pen.

The political conspiracy theorists were a buttoned-down, elbow-patched, cerebral bunch who tended to gather in the backyard to discuss important political conspiracy stuff, despite the music pumping out of the speakers by the pool. They weren't big dancers. There was an old, white-haired dentist who specialized in giving braces to young men so they could avoid the draft. And Humanae, a skinny black guy who always seemed cheerfully drunk. My brothers and I once caught him alone on the living room sofa, making out with a large pink blow-up Easter bunny. This was toward the end of one of these long party weekends when everyone was tired, so maybe the Easter bunny was the recipient of the only sexual energy Humanae could muster at that point before falling asleep. Or passing out.

Various Black Panthers like Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver came and went like they were movie stars (often with lawyers or bodyguards in tow), causing a big stir as well as an uptick of FBI drive-bys.

Another frequent sleepover guest was Robby Meeropol, the son of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, who had been tried and convicted of espionage for passing atomic secrets to the Russians. They were electrocuted in 1953. My mom was on the Rosenberg Committee—a group working to posthumously exonerate the couple. She had a red phone installed in the den in case anyone should call with new evidence on Julius and Ethel Rosenberg’s miscarriage of justice. No one was allowed to use this phone. Which never rang. If I had known the number, I would have called it while my brothers were watching TV, just to freak them out.

And at every party was Gil Toff—a skinny, scruffy, white guy—who was everybody’s friend and/or an enterprising grifter. He once took me to David Carradine’s house, where David and his girlfriend Barbara Seagull (née Hershey) squatted on the floor with Gil to talk about important things. I sat on a chair, as I didn’t know them well enough to join the figurative campfire. Plus, I was feeling gassy.

Gil had his own conspiracy theory about the Kennedy Assassination, which centered around then Vice-President Johnson hiring a special driver to shoot Kennedy while the motorcade drove toward the underpass where there would be fewer onlookers, i.e., witnesses. However, a few stragglers lingered on the grassy knoll. One was Mr. Zapruder, his 8mm camera whirring, catching the end of the motorcade as it passed by, and thus recording the moment President Kennedy was shot in the head. Gil’s theory: The driver did it.

Although barely a teenager, I considered myself a free-thinker and therefore I wasn’t swayed by the theories swirling around downstairs when the adults were talking and drinking; I wanted to investigate for myself what the “facts” were. I guess some teenagers rebelled by putting on

eyeliner, sneaking out at night, and smoking on the corner with friends, but I chose to figure out who killed Kennedy.

Gil gave me an illegal copy of the Zapruder film, so I started there. I took my dad's projector up to my room and watched the twenty-six-second film—over and over—for five hours, meaning I watched it like a billion times. I wrote letters to John Connally, J. Edgar Hoover, and Chief Justice Warren, whose committee produced twenty-six volumes to say Lee Harvey Oswald did it. (The Commission doth protest too much?) I wrote to gun experts. I wrote to the Parkland doctors who had famously tried to keep Kennedy alive. I got responses from everyone.

Dr. Peters' letter was the most personal, and his response sounded like a holiday letter included in Christmas cards, filled with cheery-sounding updates I hadn't asked for: "Mrs. Oswald has remarried and is living in the area with her new husband. She had delivered a baby at Parkland Hospital, I believe Oswald's second child, a few months before the assassination. Mr. John Connally, who was shot along with President Kennedy, is now Secretary of the Treasury and seems to have recovered completely, aside from some wrist pain." Well, Merry Christmas. Only one sentence in his letter seemed out of place in what would have been this otherwise cheery holiday assassination update: "Examination of the brain revealed most of the cerebellum was shot away."

I never was able to determine who shot Kennedy.

Otherwise, we were like any post-'50s suburban family, with a mother who felt trapped and supplemented the adrenaline of her political buzz with the amphetamines she kept under the bathroom sink, and a successful father who liked to swim in the pool naked and taught our mynah bird jazz trombone solos.

During the week, once the parties wound down, we fell into our familiar positions of retreat and solitude, and it was back to just our family at dinner, playing Twenty Questions to avoid anything getting too personal, often going no deeper than: “Is it bigger than a bread box?” Mom wouldn’t eat much, preferring to nibble and smoke. I was always back on a start-of-a-new-week diet, and then there was Gramma Ruth, who had her own work-around denial going on. She was tiny, with tiny hands and feet, and a tiny mouth creased from smoking and judgment. When dinner included carbohydrates—which was every night—she’d say, “I’ve been good all week,” as she reached for a baked potato, which exhibited some kind of twisty physics, considering she said this maybe five times a week.

It was disorienting to go from the weekend parties—with all the wild, sexually-charged, alcohol-fueled, unstructured antics—to our small weeknight dinners where sedate parlor games were our only intimacies, and a baked potato became a big adventure. I found it easier to judge Gramma Ruth than look at all of the magical eating, fasting, and diet-chart-making I was doing to try and feel good about myself. Or take control of myself. Or at least not hate myself.

I was probably a normal weight for a teenager, but as with most eating issues, my daily obsession with my body was a distraction from my confusion and loneliness. Better to hate my thighs than hate my mother and better to be thin than hate my thighs. I hadn’t yet discovered bulimia, which would later become another tool in my never-ending diet arsenal.

After dinner, Dad hung out with his trombone in the cabaña by the pool when he wasn’t taking night gigs as a studio musician. Mom stayed in her bedroom with her cigarettes and brandy. My brother Ted skateboarded around the neighborhood while Bill played with his Hot

Wheels in his bedroom upstairs. And I was either alone in my room eating ice cream, or in the den watching TV.

I wouldn't follow in my mother's political footsteps or my father's musical footsteps. I wasn't taking a lot of footsteps, generally. Ted—who was thin and practiced magic tricks—would eventually win two Grammys as a sax player and composer, and Bill—who was chubby and liked biting people—would eventually make amazing guitars that are works of art, coveted by rock musicians near and far. I got straight As in school and was studying acting. And despite all the time I spent trying new diets every week—which involved an endless parade of graphs, colored pencils, and innumerable fresh starts—I mostly watched a lot of TV.

I loved TV.

Occasionally, during one of these quiet, lonely weekdays, I'd come down from my bedroom to watch TV and find my mom in the den—with her bourbon and Pall Malls—watching an old black and white movie. Like *The Shop on Main Street*, where a Czech man takes over a Jewish-run business in a town occupied by Nazis, or *Town Without Pity*, in which four American soldiers rape a German girl. Fun! It wasn't exactly *Mary Poppins* but I loved sitting next to her on the couch, just the two of us, no matter what she was watching. A movie was usually an hour and a half, so I knew I'd be near her for at least that long. When the movie was over, she usually closed up on herself, got quiet, and left me alone in the den. But I learned to take what I could get.

As I got older, I spent time in my bedroom doing homework and then retreated to the den where I could watch TV. *Secret Agent*, *Get Smart*, *Bewitched*, *The Avengers*, *I Spy*, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, *Mission: Impossible*, *That Girl*, and *The Smothers Brothers*. One night after dinner,



on my way to the den to sedate myself with a plate of Oreos and the solace of mind-numbing entertainment, I passed Mom in the kitchen.

She asked why I watched so much TV, and I said in my moody and rebellious teenage voice: “To escape from reality.”

She glared at me and said in her moody, hostile voice: “What’s wrong with your fucking reality, Miss!?”

Asked and answered.

But there was only so much TV I could watch and only so many cookies I could eat before the gnawing, unsettled feelings of emotional hunger and despair found their way to the surface. My need to be held, to be loved. To be myself. Instead, I kept up with the constant monitoring of my mother’s moods until it felt safe to be me, a habit I fine-tuned and employed with others for years, which felt both protective and exhausting.

This unsatisfied longing was a breathless internal cry that came to a head and nearly destroyed me when I saw *Romeo and Juliet* for my fourteenth birthday. My mom dropped me off at the theater near Corbin Bowl on Ventura Boulevard. I sat alone in the dark watching an overwhelming, nearly unbearable love play out on the screen. When the movie ended, I couldn’t stop sobbing. I wanted to stay in the dark theater because this tearful heaving felt out of control, but I didn’t want to keep my mom waiting. I pulled it together, went out front, and stood in the cool fall weather, intermittently crying and looking for our station wagon. I needed her to explain why I felt so lost. I was also afraid that my crying would be too much for her. I wanted someone to know how sad it was to feel the longing between Romeo and Juliet. I wanted to be consoled. I wanted someone to hold me while I cried. But I had learned as a child that expressing this need

for my mother only pushed her away, leaving me frozen and hoping even a soft breeze of her love might come my way.

Once in the car, and between the muffled wet sobbing, I said, “I’m so sad.”

“Why?” She lit a Pall Mall.

“They loved each other so much. That’s all they wanted, and they couldn’t have it. Their love died with them.” And I was sobbing again.

“There’s Kleenex in the glove compartment,” she said, and picked a fleck of tobacco from her tongue.

“Okay.” I found the tissues in their Pan Am wrapping, but extracting one was like pulling out a small sheet of dust, and when I blew my nose, the tissue dissolved into a gooey mess.

“It’s teenage hormones,” she said, as if she had just solved the problem.

But I was left wondering if she meant *my* teenage hormones or Romeo and Juliet’s. If nothing else, the wondering distracted me long enough to stop crying.

After that heartfelt exchange, we drove in silence, except for all the sniffing as I pulled myself together. The crying had worn me out. This *could* have been simple teenage hormones, but looking back, I must have sensed that my mother’s maternal instincts were waning, and despite appreciating her honest responses, I’d need to find a larger-than-life love to compensate for the gap left by her absence. I knew I needed to find my own great love. That to-the-bone, undying feeling of connection that would fill the deep longing I had. But before I shut the door on any hope for mother love, I needed a substitute that would fill me, comfort me, distract me, delight me.

This is when my obsession took hold. When I found my own reason for living.

I was watching TV and was spellbound when Warren Beatty appeared on the screen in a movie from 1961 called *Splendor in the Grass*. I decided at that moment I would love him, and he would welcome my love, and he would eventually love me back. We would have a secret connection that would start at some undetermined time in the future and would fulfill me for the rest of my life. And knowing this calmed me.

Natalie Wood was also in the movie, playing a vulnerable, psychologically unhinged, and obsessively smitten love interest. I'm guessing most young girls probably saw the movie and aligned with Natalie Wood. But the person who held me in his unknowing thrall was Warren Beatty. The way he looked at her, the subtle, knowing pain behind his eyes, his stunning face that was almost too beautiful to take in. I would rescue him, and he would rescue me. We would love one another forever. Or maybe I'd simply imprinted on him like a duckling to a human, seeing him when I'd felt my most vulnerable, my most alone and bereft. If I'd waited an hour to watch *Bonanza*, I might have fallen head over heels for Lorne Greene.

Any other obsession may have faded naturally with time and other interests, but my focus on Warren Beatty was absolute, and with him, I'd find a great love. It wasn't some girly crush that would include posters on my wall or putting his photo in a secret diary. I wanted more. It was my mission to *know* him. Not to meet him, not to get an autograph, but to know him and have him in my life forever. He would see me. Not in that fucked up, what's-the-matter-with-Natalie-Wood way. And he would let me see him. Not in that look-at-me-I'm-a-movie-star way. I would love *him*. I would be his equal.

To an outsider, this may have seemed like an unrealistic or almost pathological longing, like that of women who found comfort in writing to prison inmates. Or the ease of submitting all

one's passion to Jesus, who—by his physical absence—is strangely always there for you. Or maybe this was only a way of prolonging disappointment: If I wasn't going to feel love from my mother now, I would create a future where I'd feel seen and heard, like the indirect comfort of dreaming about future fame, of a place where love was abundant. Or maybe I longed for a recipient of the love I had to give. Maybe this was all silliness, but these feelings had to go somewhere. This would be my workaround for my loneliness and longing.

I could live off the fantasy until I made it a reality. Granted, meeting him would have been less likely had I lived in Wisconsin, but I had been born in Hollywood; I lived in the Valley. He wasn't that far away.

And at fourteen, I knew what the first step would be.

I would need to grow up.

## 2 – Bob Altman and His Magic Tricks

In the late 1960s, it was all Nixon and Vietnam. Mom expressed her fury about both by attending local demonstrations and sit-ins. My brothers—although still young—worried about being drafted, but Mom assured them that if the time came, her dentist friend could give them fake braces to avoid the draft. I was almost sixteen and—while waiting to be old enough to put my still-nebulous Warren plan into action—hung out with my best friend Tina, whose brother made us fake IDs to buy alcohol.

The crazy weekend parties continued to a lesser extent but were still counterbalanced by our more sedate weekday family dinners. The only big change was that Twenty Questions was replaced with The Datebook Game which consisted of someone throwing out a date and Dad looking it up in one of his datebooks to report what had happened that day. He'd kept all his datebooks, which detailed his jobs, but also any other pertinent goings-on. The entries included such disparate items like "2p Warner Bros with Mancini," "Boys' therapy with Mrs. B," and "Barb and N (Nikki) to bar with Huey Newton." I still have all those datebooks and found the entries for one day where in the morning, Dad had "Fixed the lawnmower," and in the evening, there was a "Black Panther Fundraiser." Typical family stuff.

The Datebook Game was benign enough until I had a boy over for dinner and, rather than actually talk to him, someone threw out a date, Dad grabbed the appropriate datebook, thumbed through, and found the page. He announced it was from a time two years previous when our family had vacationed in Scituate, Massachusetts. I was expecting something like "Walked on

the beach” or “Cooked lobster,” but he cleared his throat and blurted out the first entry for that summer day.

“N had messy period.”

True, I’d had a messy period that required my getting up before anyone else, hand-washing the sheets, and hanging them on the line outside to dry before remaking the bed. I guess Mom explained to Dad why I was up early, and he felt it was noteworthy enough to go down in the datebooks.

Fine, but could he have maybe *lied* on this night when I had a boy over? Or left that part out? I was mortified and never invited any boys over for dinner again. Maybe this night would become an entry in the datebook: “N upset for no reason.” All those weekend parties with no sexual boundaries, and it was a quiet dinner with my family that left me feeling unsafe. Unprotected. Exposed.

By 1970, the wild weekend parties were subsiding, and Mom started hosting more sedate dinner parties, which felt more like a throwback to a quieter time from the ‘50s cracker box era. Maybe she was tired, or maybe it gave her a chance to use the dining room, which was usually just a pass-through room to the den. I loved seeing the table come alive with plates and glasses and thin white candles—or tapers, as my mother called them. It was the only room that reflected her more modern tastes: a tiled floor that was cold to bare feet, a white table with six high-backed black dining chairs, and sleek black shelving that displayed dinnerware patterned in a black and white atomic theme, which to me was more Cold War than cozy. Compared to the shag-carpeted living room—with its oversized wooden coffee table, big brick fireplace, colorful

glass vases, framed album covers, and pet hair—stepping into the dining room was like entering a cool and unadorned dining room in Sweden.

At one of these dinner parties, Bob Altman sat at the head of the table and held court as his wife, Kathryn, irreverently interjected corrections which Bob both acknowledged and ignored with a wave of his hand as he rambled on, a dynamic that my mother seemed to envy: the intelligence, the banter, the sly humorous equality of their exchanges. I loved how upbeat Mom seemed before and during dinner. Animated, happy. Dressed up and with a purpose, at least for a few hours. The deflation would descend after the guests had gone, and she retreated into a small world that didn't include me.

Bob also liked to do magic tricks at the table, and I dutifully played the part of his young magician's assistant. He'd find me earlier to rehearse with him in the den when the others were in the living room having cocktails. I liked being in on the secret of his magic tricks, and although I usually stayed in my room during Mom's dinner parties, when Bob was over, I lingered nearby until it was—Showtime!

Bob got everyone's attention with his booming voice and called for me to join them in the dining room, where I took my place standing beside him at the head of the table. He turned his empty highball glass upside down, covered it with his napkin, then lifted the glass and napkin combo and held it up to show that the glass was still in his hand and not on the table. Everyone nodded, *Yeah, we get it: you're holding the glass.*

He delivered some snappy patter as he set the glass back down on the table. He grabbed my hand by the wrist and slammed my palm down on top of the glass. Nothing shattered. My hand was fine. The glass had disappeared, leaving the napkin flattened on the table. What the others

didn't know was that when he lifted the glass to prove he was still holding it, on the way back to putting it on the table, he'd dropped it onto his lap, with me standing close to make sure it didn't bounce off his leg. During the slight applause, he looked at me like I was his smart, little sidekick, had me take a bow, and seemed to appreciate my playing the innocent.

I wasn't auditioning for him, but I *was* studying acting at Everywoman's Village—which in its early days was called either “a school for bored housewives” or “a cultural center for women,” depending on whom you asked—but I'd never mentioned acting to Bob or asked him for help or guidance. I knew there was a separation of church and state, but also, I was never comfortable asking *anyone* for help. Better to keep my needs to myself—and hope someone intuited them—than risk being rejected. Or so I'd learned as a child.

Better to say nothing and then be surprised if something good comes my way by happenstance. And, of course, this meant I'd never ask him if he knew Warren Beatty. Or maybe I didn't want to know; perhaps I only wanted Warren as a fantasy, the bubble of which might burst if I ever actually met him. However, it was too soon to admit that.

After *M\*A\*S\*H* made Bob famous, my parents were invited to a screening of his new movie, followed by a party at his Lionsgate offices in Westwood Village. My parents asked if I wanted to go with them. I wished I had something else to do, but I said yes, if only to keep in touch with Bob while I continued with my acting classes.

Maybe he would intuit my desire for help? He never did.

The movie was *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and starred Julie Christie and Warren Beatty. What? We were ushered into the screening room, and I wondered if Warren Beatty would be there in person. I'd seen him in *Bonnie and Clyde*, which had only contributed to my obsession. I looked



around but didn't see any of the actors and relaxed a little. Once the movie began, I felt a flush on my face and a drop in my belly seeing my beloved on screen.

I had not shared my secret obsession with anyone, including my parents, which was fortunate, as they would have teased me about it after the movie, and Warren was more important to me than just fodder for teasing. I'd seen *Bonnie and Clyde* and wished I was Faye Dunaway, but only to be near Warren Beatty. I knew this was a fantasy. I knew these were movies. I wasn't delusional. But the thing was, I didn't want to be *acting* in a movie with Warren, I wanted to *be* with Warren. In real life.

The party after the movie was boring. Adults standing around talking with Bob in sycophantic tones about the movie, the directing, the acting, the music. I went into the small kitchen in his suite of offices, looking for something to drink, or maybe to take a break from feeling like—at fifteen—the youngest person in a room full of adults. I found the glasses in a cabinet, filled my glass with tap water, and took a sip while staring out the window at the lights of Westwood. I thought I was alone, but I heard a male voice behind me say, "Where did you find the glass?" I turned and there was Warren Beatty.

He seemed larger than life, taller than I'd imagined, and was the most gorgeous man I had ever seen. My vision felt blurry. I blushed and worried he'd feel the heat coming from my body. "In the cabinet here." I set my glass down by the sink, got another glass from the cabinet, and handed it to him. I felt one of his fingers briefly on mine as he took the glass from my hand.

"Thank you," he said with that low, silky voice.

He was looking at me. I nodded and smiled, turned back to the cabinet and quietly closed it, picked up my glass, and with my back to him, I took another sip and again looked out the window, willing my heart to slow down.

He left me alone in the small kitchen.

Which was what I'd wanted.

Meeting him now wasn't in the plan. I was still too young to start our grand love affair, so I avoided any interaction that wasn't going to lead to something more or would color how he would see me once I got older. I didn't want him to see me as a child. Or remember me as a child. I wanted to be a woman and his equal. Darn. So close and yet several years too soon. I was shaking. I could still feel the touch of his finger, feel the heat of him from where he'd been standing in the kitchen looking at me.

I went back to the party, but Warren had gone, and by then, it was time for my parents to go. I went with them to the valet parking, got in the back seat of the station wagon, and we drove home. Dad drove; Mom talked about the movie and the party. I thought about Warren, replaying every second of our almost non-encounter, knowing I would never forget it and that he most likely had already forgotten.

The parties in Tarzana dwindled.

Mom seemed to be without purpose or distraction. Her dissatisfaction with her life had no outlet, and the house was filled with unspoken tension. Knowing that some mothers occasionally long for the youth they see blossoming in their daughters, I wondered if she was jealous of me. Or maybe her depression was more profound; it was an old habit of mine to try and figure out

why she was so distant, always assuming it had something to do with me. It may have had nothing to do with me. Maybe I was just there. A silent witness.

Dad, cheery and oblivious, continued to clean the pool as usual and swim naked when there *was* company. And one day, the “company” enjoying the warm fall weather and perhaps my dad’s nudity, were a couple of Catholic nuns—in street clothes—who had left the order to be part of the “revolution,” which—when it didn’t involve demonstrations and sit-ins—often involved sitting in our backyard waiting for Dad to do another naked swan dive. Their recently discarded habits ended up with my mom who then gave them to me.

You know, for fun.

Finally sixteen and able to drive, I was starting to drink more on the weekends, and since my friend Tina and I were too nervous to try out our fake IDs at the liquor store, we dressed in the nuns’ habits to buy alcohol. We did this every weekend, dressing in the habits at my house and then taking my green VW down Ventura Boulevard to the Time To Buy liquor store. It seemed the store clerks didn’t have an actual protocol for nuns buying alcohol. Did nuns have a legal drinking age? Were nuns supposed to carry ID, and if so, where would they keep it? Were there pockets somewhere in all that black fabric? Were the clerks even allowed to ask nuns for their ID? They often paused, and I imagined these thoughts cascading through their brains. Or maybe they were simply looking at us for what we were: young girls. As men do. But we’d hand them cash, which broke their reverie, and they’d hand us the bottle.

I didn’t have a big religious background (i.e., none) and only a vague idea about wine, but having tasted leftover Manischewitz Concord Grape at one of our parties—not realizing nuns probably didn’t drink Manischewitz—that’s what we bought. It was sweet and gave us a buzz.

Sometimes we'd put on the nuns' habits and go to Topanga Plaza, approach young guys, and ask if they had any reds—a sleeping pill/downer—just to see their reactions. There may still be some old guy somewhere telling the story of when a nun at the mall asked him if he wanted to get laid. If we saw families, children, or impressionable youth, we bowed our heads and walked solemnly ahead, nun-like. I didn't believe in God, but if others did, I didn't want to spoil it for them.

Now that I could drive, I spent less time hiding out in my bedroom or the den, and when I wasn't with Tina, I hung out with my friend Conny at her house. She was lively and smart, and her parents were doctors. Her family fascinated me. When I stayed over for dinner, I was surprised when they had actual conversations while together at the table. There was talk of someone's day, which might lead to something someone read. Or something philosophical, medical, cultural, or school-related. It seemed so free-form and unstructured—almost dangerous without the boundaries of a controlled parlor game.

I was still studying acting, although not at high school. Maybe I didn't want to be under the seeming scrutiny of my peers or risk exposing myself as either superior or without talent. My tendency to have a secret life kept me from fully engaging in high school, just as the lack of conversation at our dinner table may have reinforced my interpretation that no one was interested in anything I had to say.

Conny wasn't interested in acting and would eventually become a doctor. But in high school, we were innocents and both up for an adventure. She showed me a small blurb she'd found in her sister's *Back Stage* magazine: A movie in Hollywood was looking for extras. Hollywood was just over the hills from where we lived, and even if this wasn't how I imagined my career

starting, I figured, why not? My delusionally grand plan was to simply start at the top, but in the meantime, being an extra could be fun, and you never knew. Conny made the arrangements.

On the day of the movie shoot, I grabbed the Thomas Guide from my car, looked up Camrose in the index, found the page with a map of tiny streets and tiny street names, and directed us while she drove over Cahuenga to Highland to Camrose near the Hollywood Bowl. I spotted Broadview Terrace, but it was blocked by vans and trailers.

Conny slowed and I rolled down my window to ask a guy—who had a walkie-talkie and was standing guard at the corner—where we should park. That we were extras. We were directed to a lot near the Hollywood Bowl, and after parking, we walked the few blocks back to Broadview Terrace. It was a small dead-end street with a tall tower at the end and an elevator leading to the terraces of four connected apartments. The sun was setting, and the air felt lush with fuchsia bougainvillea. People were busy with production tables and scripts; lighting equipment was carried to the elevators, and actors and extras were going in and out of trailers. We found someone to ask about the extra work and they pointed to a holding area. We waited, watching the sun slowly set behind the hills, and wondered if we should say something. Or find someone. Had we been forgotten? Or no longer needed? A woman came by and looked us up and down, paying close attention to our jeans and our sandals. She wrote something on a clipboard and left. A few minutes later, someone fetched us and took us to a young, stern guy who explained what we'd be doing. We were revelers at an all-night party on the terrace adjacent to where the main character, played by Elliot Gould, lived.

I resisted the temptation to look around at the mention of his name—I didn't want to seem overly eager, like some neophyte. I was going for more of the seasoned professional. Come on: I'd sat on a small merry-go-round with Vic Morrow!

But Conny, after hearing *Elliot Gould*, looked at me and raised her eyebrows.

The guy continued. We'd do the topless shots first and—

"I'm sorry, what?" I said, maybe too quickly for him to understand.

"What?" he said, surprised he'd been interrupted.

"We weren't told it was topless."

"That's not my problem. I just place the talent."

He continued talking about the particulars of the schedule—it would be an all-night shoot, snacks would be provided during a break, etc.—and we'd be taken up in a few minutes. I looked at Conny but couldn't read her expression.

"I don't think I want to do this," I said to the humorless guy.

"Again, not my problem," he said and walked away.

I thought about how far away the car was. Would they stop us at the end of the street if we simply left? Could they force us to do this? Conny didn't seem as frightened as I was, and when I said I wanted to leave, she said she wanted to stay, at which point the guy returned, followed by —Bob Altman.

"Here's the director," the guy said.

"Bob! It's Nikki." I said my name, knowing how he might be distracted or may not immediately recognize me out of context; I didn't want it to be awkward for him if he needed a moment to process.

“So it is,” he said.

I was relieved to see him. My shoulders relaxed. I didn’t know he was directing the movie when we’d signed up, and I was excited I could show Conny that I knew important people. That this was Bob, my family friend. It was a good sign. We’d play our very small parts in his movie, and we could keep our tops on.

“How are your parents?” He seemed rushed.

“Fine,” I said.

“Listen, this shot is set up and Elliot’s in place. We gotta go.”

“Okay. But I don’t want to take my top off.”

“That’s the scene.” He turned to the others near us and bellowed, “Come on, let’s go.” Back to me: “It’s a wide shot. You’re background. No one will even see you.”

He walked away. I felt lost. Didn’t Bob remember that I was his magician’s assistant when I was younger? That I’d refilled his drinks before I was even a teenager?

I didn’t know what to do, but Conny shrugged like, *oh well*, and we followed the stern guy to the elevators and up to the apartment.

I was numb when we arrived on set. Rutanya Alda, playing the neighbor, took me under her wing and spoke gently to me. A new guy came over and explained that the scene was later at night when Elliot’s character is coming home from getting cat food.

“Places.” The new guy looked at us like *Take off your tops*.

The other women easily complied; it seemed easy for them. Maybe because they were older than we were or thought this would help their careers.

We took off our tops as if we were the unwitting participants in another of Bob's magic tricks, conforming to the rules of his game.

There were other extras I hadn't met, and except for the brief kindness from Rutanya Alda, I was among bare-breasted strangers. Conny and I danced around and pretended to laugh like we were at a party and having fun. I guess this was where my ten years of acting classes came in handy. Seeing Conny topless made it seem more natural that I was topless, and so we spent the night on the terrace, take after take, as the night got longer and the air got colder. I fabricated a character who was having fun, who didn't feel exposed, who simply loved the feel of the crisp air on her body and her friends laughing nearby and the lights of Hollywood in the distance.

The movie was *The Long Goodbye*.

I never told my parents what had happened, not wanting to burden them with my vulnerabilities or implicate their director friend for not looking out for me. Johnny Williams ended up scoring the movie, which meant my dad ended up doing the recording session. I doubt my dad even noticed who was in the movie, as the musicians played to a click track and didn't always pay much attention to what was on the screen.

As Bob had said, it was a wide shot, and we were just bodies in the background.