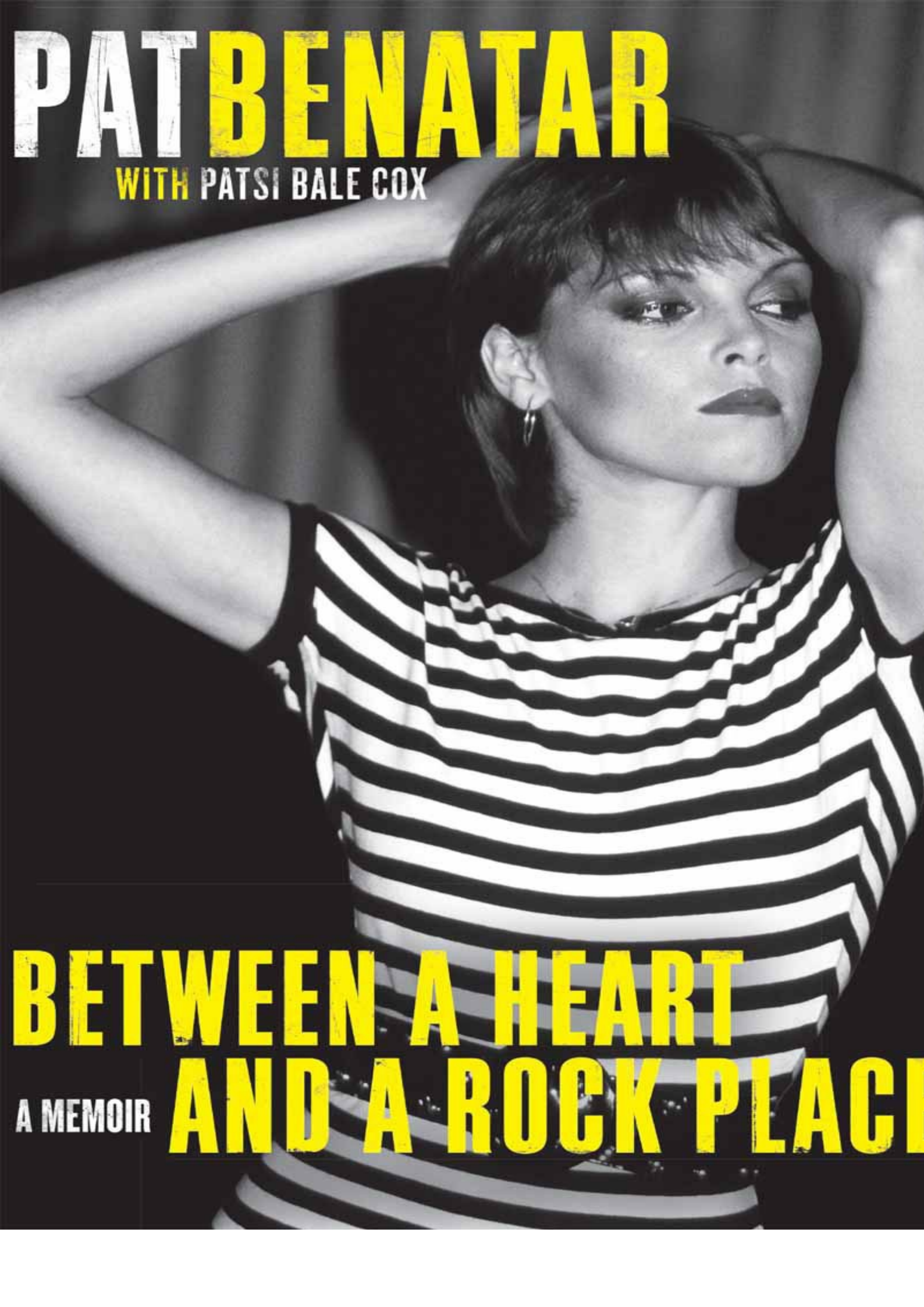


# PAT BENATAR

WITH PATSI BALE COX

**BETWEEN A HEART  
AND A ROCK PLACE**

A MEMOIR





# **Between a Heart and a Rock Place**

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**A Memoir**

**Pat Benatar**  
**with Patsi Bale Cox**

 HarperCollins e-books

*For PD, Bina, and Boo Boo, you make my heart sing*

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1979

I KNEW THE SOUND wasn't right.

As I sat there, listening to the playback from my first-ever recording session, I knew that something was off. It wasn't that the speakers were bad or the mics were low. It wasn't that my voice sounded wrong or the drummer was off the beat. It was more subtle than all that, but also much worse—not something that could be fixed by a simple equipment change. The problem was that I sounded like Julie Andrews trying to sing rock.

Part of the issue was that the musicians whom the producers had hired were very precise players. Everything sounded perfect—so perfect it was bland. It wasn't working. It wasn't rock and roll. I knew it, the producers knew it, and the record company knew it. But still everyone kept shoving me in the same direction.

For my first record deal, I'd signed with a label called Chrysalis Records. I'd been knocking on doors in New York for a couple of years when Chrysalis offered me a deal. My manager, Rick Newman, was a comedy club owner with no music experience. He'd discovered me while I was performing at Catch a Rising Star, a club in New York, and he believed in me enough to take on management duties. Early on, what he lacked in music knowledge, he made up for in passion, and he'd been fantastic in presenting me to labels. His enthusiasm was infectious. But though he was my biggest cheerleader and the greatest guy, he had to rely heavily on our attorneys, business manager, and the record label for advice. Chrysalis had signed a chick singer, and a chick singer was what they expected me to remain. The result was the all-too-perfect sound of my first session.

I didn't set out to be a solo artist. My dream was to be the singer in a rockin' band, like Robert Plant was to Led Zeppelin or Lou Gramm to Foreigner. I wanted a partnership, like Mick Jagger and Keith Richards had—an unrelenting back-and-forth between talented musicians. The sound I heard in my head was raucous, with hard-driving guitars speeding everything forward. I was a classically trained singer with a great deal of musical knowledge, but I had no idea how to make that visceral, intense sound happen. I had to evolve, but I didn't know how to make that evolution happen. And apparently, my record label didn't either.

It wouldn't be enough just to have a backing band who could play it looser. Deep down I knew that I needed a partner, somebody who understood where I wanted to take my music. Somebody to help me get there and be an equal and integral part of the band, a partner in every step we took. Somebody whom I wouldn't have to sit around and try desperately to explain my sound to, but who would just hear my voice and instinctively know. Make no mistake: I was looking for a music partner, *not* a boyfriend. I was separated from my first husband but still legally married. I'm far too traditional to have shrugged that detail off. The truth is, I didn't want any man in my life right then, except for a musical partner.

For its part, Chrysalis had no interest in bringing some dude into the act, except as a backup musician. At first, I didn't know how to react to the record executives, so I listened to them, and for a while, I followed along. I'm opinionated and strong, but not really confrontational. I don't pick fights with people unless they're necessary. When you're young, you tend to let people run your show,



especially when those people have been successfully running a lot of other people's shows. But even as they kept pushing me to fall in line, I knew their way was wrong.

Thankfully, I trusted my instincts. That's probably the single most important thing anyone can know: *trust your gut*. It's especially important for young people because there are always going to be older folks hanging around explaining why they know best. I was young and inexperienced when I started out in music, and there were times I bought into the other people's *I know best* routine. And when I went against my gut, the decisions turned out to be wrong every time. Somewhere deep inside you know which is the right path and which is the wrong one. The problem is that so many times we start doubting ourselves, questioning, second-guessing. My advice? Get over it. Remember that this is your career, and you don't get too many shots. If you go with what you believe, you will almost always be a step ahead of the game.

Now, if you do *not* believe your gut is trustworthy, then find some people whose intuition you do trust. Surround yourself with a few people who inspire confidence and run your ideas past them. As irritating as it was to have conflict with my label, I not only trusted my gut, but I had a few people around me who did as well.

Not being a music man, Rick may not have completely understood my thinking, but he knew that I wasn't going to back down. One fellow at Chrysalis Records understood what I wanted and why—my A&R man, Jeff "Buzzard" Aldridge. A&R stands for "artists and repertoire," and those are the staff members who deal directly with the artists and their music. The A&R guy is your guy. Everyone else is the record company's guy. Buzzard was our day-to-day person, the one I usually dealt with and the one I trusted.

The only problem with A&R representatives is that they are not usually the decision makers. They are not the people who will be marketing and selling your music or setting your promotion budget. Those are the suits, and they could make or break careers, including mine. And musically, those guys weren't getting it.

Luckily, after those first misdirected recording sessions, Buzzard convinced the suits to bring in one of the top producers in the business, Mike Chapman. He'd been working with Blondie at the time and didn't even think he'd be able to produce a whole record. Still, he'd work on a couple tracks with us. I'd heard talk that Chapman was difficult, something of a Svengali, because he was very controlling, but his success working with Blondie had Chrysalis foaming at the mouth. Though not a musician himself, Chapman was a very instinctual producer. He wasn't necessarily going to find the sound himself, but he might be able to connect me to people who could.

Initially Chapman was the only person who understood what I was going for, and he navigated a way to get it accomplished. He listened to me explain what I wanted, and started looking around for somebody who fit the picture. I could hear the guitar I wanted, the one that would bring alive what was only in my mind at that point. I'd been trying to come up with a partner and a sound for months, to no avail. My frustrations were rising on a daily—maybe hourly—basis. But I knew that Chapman was talented and smart. I want people who work with me to either be smarter than me or be willing and able to work harder than I do. (That's critical, because I am a working dog.)

Chrysalis set up a time to audition some players at SIR rehearsal hall on Thirty-seventh Street in Manhattan. After they got the initial lineup booked, Chapman had another thought, a twenty-two-year-old kid who had been touring with Rick Derringer.

"I think this is the one, Pat. His name is Neil Giraldo. He's perfect—just what you've been looking for."

"Okay, bring him in to audition."

"Well, I didn't tell him he's coming to an audition as such. I just told him to stop by so you could meet him. He's a genius, Pat."

That certainly grabbed my attention. “Genius” wasn’t a word that Chapman used often. Chapman wasn’t going to be at the audition, but Buzzard made the arrangements for Neil to meet with us. And so as the time went by that day, I got more interested in meeting this genius. Then I was told that Buzzard had arrived with the guitar player.

“Oh, cool,” I said, nonchalantly.

I was talking to Rick Newman, with my back to the door, and didn’t turn around immediately. When I did, Buzzard was talking to this guy Neil. He stood there looking like Adonis, hair to his shoulders, the most drop-dead gorgeous man I had ever seen in my life. Somewhere in the distance the “Hallelujah” chorus was playing. Luckily he didn’t look at me in that moment, because I froze in my tracks. Something shot through my entire being. Every nerve ending in my body lit up like the Fourth of July, and every hormone in my body went insane. I felt like someone had hit me in the face with a two-by-four.

I thought, *Girl, you have just seen the father of your children.* (Did I mention that I was *not* looking for a boyfriend?)

When Neil finally turned around, I honestly felt like time slowed down. It’s corny. It’s a cliché. But that’s exactly how I felt, like he was walking toward me in slow motion.

“Hi, I’m Neil Giraldo.”

At that point I finally noticed that he didn’t have a guitar. Here was a musician who was looking for a new gig until Rick Derringer went back out on tour, and though he wasn’t auditioning, he hadn’t even brought his instrument along. That endeared him to me all the more. I gave him the snappiest greeting I could think of:

“Hi.”

I couldn’t say anything else, so finally Neil sat down at the piano.

“What’s the hell is the matter with you, Pat?” Newman asked. “You barely spoke to this guy.”

I shrugged. My brain was going *gong, gong, gong!*

I finally whispered. “Newman, I don’t care if this guy can’t play a note. We’ll get him lessons. He’s in the band.”

Newman looked a little sick.

When the gonging quieted down enough for me to hear the piano, I snapped out of it, then felt a bit let down. My hormones might have been roaring, but I am, after all, a Capricorn, and capable of getting down to business. As much as I wanted this to be perfect, the piano wasn’t getting to me. He played brilliantly, but I just couldn’t feel it. Was it possible that this guy was the love of my life but not the music partner I wanted? *What a drag.* He finished playing the piece, and then he turned to the group of guys waiting to audition.

“Man, could I borrow your guitar?”

One of the musicians handed him a guitar. He turned around, leaned over, and fastened the strap. Then he turned back, fiddling with the tuning, his hair still down over his face. I wish I had that moment on film. When he hit the first chord, I nearly fell to my knees. It was amazing—the very thing I’d had in my head and never once heard anybody play. His playing was so passionate, so intense. Of course he had the gig.



# THE LITTLE ANDRZEJEWSKI GIRL WHO COULD SING

I WAS NEVER JUST a girl's girl. I grew up wanting to do boy things. Nail polish and baby dolls weren't enough for me. I wanted to be making a fort or climbing a tree. Boys seemed to have all the fun. They got to use a hammer and nails. They got to sneak into abandoned houses and go exploring. They were out riding in go-karts. All that was right up my alley.

And the boys I hung around made me tough. At first they were merciless—they never cut me any slack. You want to be on the baseball team? Use this thin mitt that hurts your hands so badly you have to bite your cheek not to cry. You want to hang out in our clubhouse? Get ready to have earthworms squished onto your bare legs. It was trial by fire, but in the end, I wouldn't have been caught dead crying over a skinned knee. All this made me fierce, and soon they realized that I was "okay for a girl," which was just fine with me, because I had a plan. I just needed them to let me in, which, of course, they did.

My plan was this: I also loved being a girl. Loved it. There wasn't enough makeup on the planet for me to play with and I lived in the pages of fashion magazines. But I was absolutely boy-crazy, and that's where my plan came in. I wouldn't be a typical tomboy; I would push the envelope in my neighborhood and bridge the gap between "girl stuff" and "boy stuff." I didn't want to be a boy, I wanted to be a girl who could do everything boys could. I thought the whole thing out: If I played boy-type games and did boy-type things, I could run around with the boys plus have all the fun they did. I got to both be them and be near them. It was the best of all possible worlds.

And that particular world started out in Greenpoint, Brooklyn—an ethnic area first populated by the Germans and Irish in the mid-nineteenth century, followed by the Poles and Italians some years later. Greenpoint was a culturally diverse neighborhood where everything from the foods to the traditions changed from block to block. You could guess the ethnicity of a street by the smells coming out of the kitchen windows. But even though their histories were wide-ranging, the people were close.

We were the Andrzejewski family, and we lived on the Polish block. Ethnically, we were a mixed family. Andrew, my father, was Polish and his family was new to America. Mom, Mildred, was Irish and Dutch with some Native American added in. I always used to say that my mother's ancestors came over on the *Mayflower*. They didn't really, but they had been in America for many generations when I was born in 1953. The Van Kuykendall and Douwes families had come from Holland to America in 1645.

When I was two years old, the family moved from Brooklyn to North Hamilton Avenue in Lindenhurst, on the South Shore of Long Island. We were not alone in this exodus from the city; quite a large group on the Polish side of the family moved to Long Island, including my father's sister as well as many cousins on my mother's side. It represented a different way of life—away from the concrete and toward the water. In Brooklyn, people lived in brownstones with everyone literally and figuratively close. That proximity to everyone you loved was terrific, but my parents wanted a "better" life for their family, a fresh start away from the immigrant neighborhoods. Out on the Island we had space. We had real yards where you could hold barbecues and family reunions. Our house even

had an aboveground pool, a luxury by anyone's standards.

Looking back on it now, life in Lindenhurst was like an episode of *Happy Days*, complete with white picket fences and picturesque churches, but it was very much a blue-collar town full of factory workers, carpenters, and fishermen. I think the only "professional" I knew was the dentist. He was also the man who owned one of the only three Mercedes I saw until I was out of high school. There was nothing fancy or pretentious about Lindenhurst. It was the kind of place where you could play outside after dark and go berry picking when you weren't clamming.

We went to the beach a lot, although it wasn't as romantic as you might think. This wasn't a beach like you'd find in Florida or California. Lindenhurst was a fishing town, and our local beach was affectionately nicknamed Crud Beach. Located on the South Bay, our waters were dark, with a reedy, sandy floor. They were also very shallow. You could practically walk across the bay. All of us kids hung out there until we were old enough that our parents allowed us to go to the "real" beaches on the Atlantic. Most of my friends' fathers were fishermen, so we had great access to boats—not the smart speedboats, but clam boats.

The clam boats were fishing vessels, flat, with a little steering house. We'd pile on and hold on for dear life; if we got hungry, we'd stop and dig up some fresh clams out of the bay. When we got older, we'd sneak out some beer, and, well, that was a perfect afternoon. Boats were like cars where I grew up, and of course, my parents never wanted me out on anyone's boat. But that never stopped me. One time, I went out on one of my friends' father's clam boat, and we were horsing around with another boat and managed to ram them into each other. We ended up losing power and needing a tow in from the Coast Guard. I was four hours late for dinner, and my parents thought I was dead. When I got home, believe me, I wished I was.

Our home on North Hamilton Avenue was a little twenty-four-by-twenty-four-foot Cape Cod, with four rooms on the main floor: a living room, kitchen, and two tiny bedrooms. The second floor was actually an attic with a pitched roof. There, we had two more tiny and much-needed bedrooms. My parents were in one of the bedrooms on the main floor, and my brother, Andy, and I shared the other. My grandmother May Prey Knapp, whom we called Nana, and her children—my mother's younger sister, Ruthie, and her younger brother, William Jr.—lived on the top floor. It was a full house to say the least.

My parents had not been planning on having us all under one roof, but shortly after we moved on to Long Island, my mother's father died. At the time, my grandmother was a young housewife in her forties, with no job skills. In the wake of his passing, there was no question that she, along with Ruthie and William Jr., would move in with us on Long Island. That was when families stayed together during difficult times, and my parents were not about to leave my mom's family in Brooklyn to fend for themselves.

Before my grandfather's death, my parents' plan for their new life on Long Island had been for my mother to stay home with me and my newly born baby brother. That vision of Long Island life was dashed once my parents had three new mouths to feed. There was no way that my father could support everyone on his own, so my mom went to work, something that terrified me at the time. I wasn't ready for her to leave me. Without her around all the time, I was forced to create a sense of independence, an emotional armor that helped me protect myself. For her part, my mom wasn't ready to leave either. Even though she knew that she'd done the right thing by taking her family in, she felt robbed of her chance to be the stay-at-home mom she'd always envisioned.

Both my parents worked in factories, Dad as a steelworker, Mom at an electronics company. I wasn't a latchkey kid, but I became self-reliant early on. My grandmother May was also there to help with keeping house, cooking the meals, caring for me and my younger brother, but I never felt she was the adult in charge. My parents were still the parents, and she was my grandmother, a different kind of

adult. She had a great sense of humor—she was a “cutup,” as they used to say, the kind of woman who’d get down on the floor and play with my brother and me—but she was also really strict. She’d wash your mouth out with soap in a heartbeat. You’d say one wrong word and she’d grab that soap and clamp you between her knees. Suddenly, that soap was in your mouth and you were spitting bubbles, wishing you’d kept quiet in the first place.

Though she may not have always been parental, my grandmother was definitely a hard worker. We had one of those old-style wringer washers, where you can smell the soap and see the steam rising out of it. She was constantly pulling hot sheets through that wringer, her muscled arms toned and looking more like a longshoreman’s than a grandmother’s. Along with my mother, my grandmother also took care of the yard work and daily house maintenance. I don’t believe I ever saw my father with a screwdriver in his hand. He did backbreaking manual labor all day at work, and he was not climbing a ladder or mowing the grass when he got home. So that was left to the females, mainly my mother and grandmother.

I suppose some people would question having your mother-in-law living in your home, but I think my father really appreciated it. The man was a saint, one of the most easygoing people I’ve ever known. And he adored my mother; as long as she was happy, he’d make any sacrifice. Besides, Nana was easy to have around. You’d never think of her as one of those cartoonish meddling mothers-in-law. She was too busy washing, ironing, and doing yard work.

Living in the attic with my grandmother were my aunt Ruthie and uncle Billy. When we moved to Lindenhurst, Ruthie had graduated high school and was working, but she drove my mom crazy. She was a wild one. Boys were coming by in cars, honking their horns. Ruthie would run out to meet them wearing her pointy stuffed bras and tight sweaters, a little scarf tied around her neck, and bright red lipstick. Ruthie had a boyfriend named Bill whom I just loved. He was handsome and drove a big blue convertible. He’d pull up in front of the house and we’d hear *honk, honk, honk*. And out she’d run waving a cigarette. I remember a few times when Ruthie came home late and my mom was so mad that she backed Ruthie up against the wall and grabbed her by that neck scarf.

“You better straighten up, Ruthie Knapp! Coming home in this shape.”

I’m not exactly sure *what* she had been doing, but whatever it was didn’t sit well with my mother. My grandmother didn’t have any idea what to do with Ruthie. Ruthie was a force of nature.

When I was about six years old, Ruthie got married, and the couple moved into the basement of our house. Unfortunately, she did not marry my hero, Bill with the blue convertible. The guy she married was an idiot who drank too much. Now instead of just one rebellious teenage girl causing trouble, we had an angry, abusive drunk living in the basement. You could hear him downstairs raising hell at Ruthie at all hours. It was like an asylum.

One day it all came to a head. After we’d heard them fighting for a while, there was a great commotion, and they ran up the stairs. Ruthie burst out of the basement door and ran across the room toward the front door. Her husband came right up after her waving a butcher knife and looking like a madman. My mom, who had been standing in the kitchen, swung into action. She grabbed an iron skillet and cracked him over the head.

“That’s it! You get out of my house right now!”

I have not seen my mother as angry before or since. I don’t think I fully appreciated it in the heat of the moment, but that took balls—taking a frying pan after a drunken man with a knife. Not exactly every one’s first instinct, yet that’s the kind of woman that my mother was.

My reaction to the whole thing was shock. I was stunned that people would chase each other around with knives and speechless that my mother could be pushed into fits of temper. Ruthie and her husband moved out, but eventually she came to her senses and got a divorce. She remarried, this time to a darling man named Ralph, with whom she began a fine family and turned over a new leaf.

If Ruthie was Mom's outrageous sibling, her younger brother, Billy, was the quiet one. Uncle Billy was sixteen when we all moved in together, and I had a mad childhood crush on him. I thought he was my personal Prince Charming. He'd sit at the kitchen table doing his homework and looking so handsome, and I'd swoon. When his girlfriend, Marilyn (who's now my dear aunt Marilyn), would come over, I'd be sure to sit between them or on Billy's lap to make sure she understood who the alpha female was in this relationship. At four, I was absolutely convinced that he was going to marry me and I couldn't understand why she was wasting her time there.

My little brother, Andy, was also a sweetheart—gentle and funny, but tall and overweight as a child, as chunky as I was skinny. He was teased mercilessly as a kid too, and it upset me to see it hurt him so deeply. Being something of a target contributed to a general sense of worry that seemed to follow Andy everywhere, exacerbating a natural tendency he inherited from my mother.

Mom was the biggest nervous Nellie I ever saw. It's no wonder that Andy was so often afraid, because Mom found danger at every turn. She worried that my father would be in a terrible accident at work or on the road home. If my father was twenty minutes late getting home, she was on the phone to the police. She was sure that one of us kids would walk across the street and get hit by a car. She lived in fear that someone would kidnap us. If she was with us at a park or playground she was sure we were going to get hurt on the equipment.

She was right to worry about Andy. My little brother got hurt so much when he was a kid that I called him Frankenstein—he'd been sewn back together that much. I worried about him incessantly and felt incredibly responsible for him. In my mind, with my mother working, accountability fell to me. He was my little brother, my duty. Sometimes it was the school that had to make the call to Mom's work. "Mrs. Andrzejewski, this is Daniel Street Elementary. Can you come get Andy?"

It was worse if he got hurt at home. Then Nana had to make the call, and she made everything into an apocalyptic event.

"Mildred, you better get home. I think Andy might need to go to the emergency room."

Hysterics!

"Is he bleeding? Is anything broken?"

I was terrified every time it happened, not so much because of Andy but because of my mother's reaction. In my head, everything was on me, as though I was the adult when Mom was gone. Whether it was real or imagined, that left me, an eight-year-old, to handle things. Of course, I was totally overwhelmed and ill equipped to deal with such circumstances, yet even at that age I thought of myself as the one in charge. My grandmother was a sweet, kind woman, but not someone you could rely on to take charge of a situation. My parents' lives were overloaded with work, and though they sacrificed so much for us, they, through no fault of their own, couldn't be there for us all the time. My dad worked constantly, and loving as he was, he was perpetually exhausted. When he came home the only thing he wanted to do was sit down, watch the ball game, eat dinner, and relax. My mom wanted to be there for us, but the practical realities of her job made that difficult.

Sometimes I think that's what caused Mom to overreact to things. Because she couldn't pay attention to every detail of our lives, when something did happen, it was both shocking and expected. She became fatalistic about every bad thing imaginable. Some horrible evil lurked right outside the door, and it was waiting for us. It drove me nuts. But her fears had an effect on me just like they did on Andy. I grew up watchful, scared that somebody *might* try to grab me off the streets. In my pursuit of independence I became guarded—ready for anything. I tended to arm myself with a stick or something, *just in case*. Of course, my mother hated that, too.

"You're gonna put your eye out!"

I tried to stay away from the house as much as possible. I knew there was a peaceful world out there with adventures that were exciting without being fatal.

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THE CONVERSATION USUALLY STARTS this way: I'll meet someone who asks me how I seem so grounded so normal. Maybe they'll tell me about an encounter they had with a rock star who acted like a complete asshole. The truth is that the way I am now is the way I've always been. People who get rich and act like idiots were always that way—only now they have money.

I've always described myself as a very common person. I grew up without a lot of angst or internalized problems. I didn't sneak out after dark to raise hell and cause my parents any sleepless nights. No drinking. No drugging. You will never see my name in some scandal sheet. It's just not gonna happen. I've never done anything in my life that would excite a tabloid reporter. In fact, if you knew me now you'd never take me for a rock star. I'd be the mom driving her daughter to high school the one who shops for her own groceries and carries them inside when she gets home, too. As Julia Roberts once said, "I'm just an ordinary person with an extraordinary job."

After thirty seconds of talking to me, people will sense all that, and they'll ask me how I've been able to stay myself.

"You are who you are" is the only response I have for them. I know who I am. And I understand just what a stretch it was for me to end up where I did.

Moving out to Long Island was considered moving on up, but despite our idea of upward mobility, we were in far worse shape financially in the years after our move. Even two incomes couldn't make up for the added expense of having Ruthie, my uncle, my grandmother, my brother, and me all under the same roof. Consequently, we were always broke. Nobody talked about it, and my parents certainly didn't resent Nana and her two younger children. But the situation left us poor, and my mom and dad were perpetually worried. You could see it on their faces and hear it in my mother's stifled sobs when it came time to pay bills.

Every month like clockwork, I'd stand in the doorway, peer into our dimly lit kitchen, and watch as my mother sat at the table with a pile of envelopes, a pad of paper, and a pen in front of her. She'd make notes and scribble down numbers. She'd keep a handkerchief on the table and use it to wipe the tears from her eyes. If she knew I was watching her, she didn't acknowledge it, and neither did I. I never said a word, just backed away and went to bed.

Going to the grocery store with Mom was awful, because her choices always involved penny-saving decisions. She never bought anything extra, no backups, no luxuries—we were always on a strict budget. We never bought more than two rolls of toilet paper at a time. Not three, *never* four. Just two. You worried all the time that the toilet paper would run out before payday. I hated that. Seriously. (Seeing my pantry today, you'd think I have a Costco franchise. In fact, Costco is one of my favorite places in the world, because I can look at all those items lined up and picture them in my pantry. I believe I own enough toilet paper to last a family of four for a year. I'm the same way with *everything*. I have stacks of frozen food in freezers, multiples of canned goods lined up on shelves. Friends and family could do their grocery shopping at my house, and they sometimes do. I feel secure knowing that I will never run out of anything, that my kids won't ever worry about not having school supplies for a project and that there will always be enough goddamn toilet paper.)

Partially because of our financial struggles, my family became a very tight group. My parents were easygoing, kind, and good-hearted. Strict without being disciplinarians. The worst I ever got growing up was a quick swat on the butt. The amount of love that my brother and I felt from my parents was intense, and to an independent girl like me, it sometimes felt more like smothering. Despite our closeness, they tried to insulate Andy and me from all the stress and hardship. I never saw them argue or ever be unkind to each other; they showed a unified front at all times. They were in love, and despite the shitty hand they'd been dealt, they were happy (except at bill-paying time).



When everyone was together at night, we would talk about our days without discussing the serious issues that they had to contend with.

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The two of them met when they were just fourteen years old. They dated until Dad went into the army, then married as soon as he got out. Mom was a wonderful opera singer and had performed with the All-City Chorus when she was young. I believe she might have turned professional if she hadn't got pregnant with me. Mom has always had a big personality—very excitable and constantly talking. She has opinions, and she won't hesitate to tell you about all of them. My dad was the opposite—quiet, thoughtful, and reserved, more of a loner. In that way I took after my father. I wasn't shy, but I was a bit of a loner, too.

My mother was a perpetual optimist; good fortune was always just around the corner, and she was hell-bent on having fun until it arrived. Even if things were horrible, all could be fixed by a drive to Amish country or cutting out sandwiches with cookie cutters or making crafts. One time when we were on vacation in Florida, my brother and I fell in love with a capuchin monkey in a pet store. We begged my mother to let us get it and she shockingly she said yes. Anything that was fun was allowed and encouraged. We bought the monkey and drove him 1,100 miles in a Dodge with my parents, my grandmother, my brother, and me. We named him Jo-Jo and he lived with us for sixteen years until he died. The crazy thing was that I never thought it was odd to have a monkey. It was only after I began telling the story to people that I came to realize how unusual it was.

I always loved this positive outlook and spontaneity, but I didn't appreciate it enough when I was a kid. It seemed flippant and irresponsible; I didn't want road trips and craft projects, I wanted her to buckle down and fix everything. What I couldn't see was how selfless her behavior actually was. She couldn't see a way out, so she made the best of a bad situation. Her only concern was her children's well-being, protecting us from the harsh realities that she and my father faced.

Even though I was young, I was already far too pragmatic to appreciate her approach. I loved both my parents, but I viewed the way they ran their lives as flighty. That, combined with the fact that I'd grown up forcing myself to feel too much responsibility, created a detachment from them that drew out my solitary qualities and toughened me up. I'd assess my problems and fix them on my own. When something was wrong with me, it was my job alone to pick myself up and dust myself off. I became self-sufficient and determined, motivated by our problems with money and by my own belief in myself. Watching my mother try to pay bills made me a driven person, determined to never be in that same situation.

I don't want to overstate things. We never went hungry. The heat and water stayed on. I had a great childhood with overworked but loving parents and a tremendous extended family. But the reality was that we were what people today call "the working poor." We lived on the edge of poverty, and I hated living on that edge. I hated it for my mother and my father, for my little brother. Oh, and I *really* hated it for me.

So, despite all these money concerns, I had a good childhood. Our school was only a few blocks from our house, and I liked to hang around the school playground in the afternoon. It was always a good time with my friends around, but it was even better when everyone else went home and I was alone, with no one around to tell me not to swing too high or stand up on the monkey bars. So that's when I climbed up on the slide and stared at the sky, thinking about things, dreaming, picturing a world where dads weren't overworked and moms didn't sit and cry late at night over money, where people worked hard and *didn't* live on the edge of financial disaster.

Reading fueled my fantasy world. I was a voracious reader—books, magazines, and newspapers anything in print. I loved to read about historical figures, about people who had done great things, about places far removed from North Hamilton Avenue. I started making up my own stories, putting characters and plots together, creating great adventures for my made-up cast. The great thing about

coming from a multiethnic neighborhood was that you had all kinds of traditions and rituals to work into your tales.

In my dreams, I was Italian, not Polish-Irish. I don't know where it came from, but I *felt* Italian. One thing I loved about Italians was the food. Most of my friends were Italian and I tried to eat at their houses as much as possible. My mother and grandmother were Americanized, and they were also Depressionized. When my mom did feel up for cooking, she knew what she was doing. She'd learned the traditions of Polish cooking from my dad's mother, and she could make some pretty amazing pierogis. But because my grandmother did the day-to-day cooking, most of the time we ate very bland food—roast and potatoes, bread, macaroni and cheese. (I don't want to sell my nana short when it comes to mac and cheese. She made her own pasta with a creamy sauce, and it was spectacular.)

The Italians, however, did not see food as mere sustenance; they saw it as an art form. Mom knew that every time I went to play with one of my Italian friends, I was going to eat. She'd ask me what I had been eating, and maybe I would say, "Snails in red sauce."

"Shhhkeeeve!" my mother would exclaim. That's what Italians said for "yuck." And wherever I ate, she used that language to tell me I had just eaten something she considered yucky.

So there I was, a Polish-Irish girl who wanted to be Italian and whose best friend, Brenda Cherney, was from one of the three Jewish families in the area. When I wasn't building forts with the boys, I was playing paper dolls with Brenda. She was my outlet for all things girly. Together we were starstruck little girls who worshiped glamour. We loved all the movie stars—Claudette Colbert, Cyd Charisse, Barbara Stanwyck, Doris Day, Judy Garland, and Katharine Hepburn. I thought that Maureen O'Hara was just the most beautiful woman in the world, that Sophia Loren was perfect and so Italian. But my absolute favorite was Audrey Hepburn, with her striking looks and high-fashion image in her films. No one looked like those people where I grew up. I obsessed over movies from the thirties and forties, admiring the women of that era for their grace and strength. What I didn't like was their passivity. I thought if you could combine being beautiful and being capable you could rule the world.

Brenda was one of the first people whom I listened to "popular" music with. We loved listening to 45s on my Victrola, and I kept the records in a little case with a poodle on it. The first song I remember buying was "The Twist" when I was about five or six. But I listened to all kinds of music. When we were a little older, we got into the Beatles, and became obsessed. The only fight we ever had was over the fact that she knocked my imitation leather "John Lennon" hat into a mud puddle. I loved Tony Bennett and Frank Sinatra, not to mention big band music and show tunes. My family's selections were not always to my taste. They loved Jerry Vale (I heard "Volare" every day), and my mom and Ruthie listened to Perry Como, Andy Williams, and Louis Prima. I adored Louie Prima even then, but even though I wasn't as sold on their choices, I learned to appreciate all sorts of styles.

And of course, since Brenda and I were both boy-crazy, we talked nonstop about boys. I remember having a little friend, Bobby Leto, in the first grade, kissing him by the fountain, and then running off giggling about it. That was about the extent of what boy-crazy meant in those days. Kisses and giggles. But my second boyfriend was important, because he was my first great Italian love, Vincent Pizzello. Oh, how I loved him, with that black hair and those sparkling dark eyes.

Because of our neighborhood, I developed a great respect for other people's religions. Brenda's mother, Ida, taught me how to keep kosher, and I loved Hanukkah as well as Christmas. I enjoyed the traditions of both religions and the traditions of the various ethnic groups, the Germans, Polish, Irish and Italians. In Lindenhurst, you embraced everyone's heritage, and I loved that diversity. There wasn't an issue about any of it. I'm not saying there was no prejudice, because I doubt you can ever completely get away from that. But for the kids, differences were simple and often about food or who owned the rarest baseball card. You ate poppy-seed cakes at your Polish friends' homes, potato pancakes with your Jewish friends, and good bread and pasta with the Italians.

Whether it was celebrating Christmas or Hanukkah, I *loved* the holiday season. I came by Christmas madness as naturally as Andy came by his anxiety—by following Mom’s lead. Christmas was one time when she threw caution to the wind. All year long we worried about running out of toilet paper, and then came Christmas. There were presents for everyone, wonderful foods, visiting with the family in Brooklyn. A similar phenomenon happened every summer. Suddenly we had money to take a wonderful vacation to a hotel with a pool or near a beach.

It was only years later, when they finally moved from the Lindenhurst house, that I found out these summer trips and Christmases were financed by constant loans they’d taken out against their home. By the time they moved, the loans had built to over \$45,000 on a house that had originally cost them \$7,000 because they had borrowed against it so many times. So not only had they not paid off a dime of the original house note, they were deep in the hole. For years they’d given us vacations and presents, never thinking about what the consequences would be down the road. This simultaneously endeared them to me and drove me crazy. Personally, I could’ve done without a week in Florida for a little more peace at home, but it made them happy to give us these things.

And so twice a year they’d given the family a big time. That’s what my parents were like. They worked and worried all year, then sunk themselves in debt in hopes of giving us kids some great memories. When you think there’s no chance of things ever really getting better, you go for anything you can and hope for the best.

THE WHEELS THAT WOULD ultimately pay off my parents’ house and allow us to buy more than two toilet paper rolls at a time started turning when I was pretty young. I was always something of a ham, singing little songs and dancing around when I was a kid, entertaining the family and getting rewarded with a hug. I usually initiated the show. The Brooklyn relatives would be on Long Island for one of our barbecues, and I’d be pestering everyone.

“Let me sing a song! Watch this!”

The older folks would say, “Okay, okay. Sing us a song.”

I’d show off, and everyone would clap. “That’s great, Patti!” I even sold concessions, buying penny candies at Brenda’s uncle’s candy store and selling them to my relatives and neighbors during the performance. Then the uncles and aunts would give me hugs, and I’d run off with the cousins to play.

But in the fourth grade music went from being a sideshow to being a major part of my life. That was the first year I was old enough to sing in the grade school choir. On the first day of choir that school year, the teacher had everyone sing so she could assess our vocal ranges. After I sang, I noticed the choir teacher looking at me with an odd expression. After choir, she approached me.

“What’s your name? I want to call your mother.”

*Oh no.* I thought I was in trouble. I never got in trouble at school. Breaking into a thinly veiled panic, I went with her to the phone, and while I held my breath in one of those horrified Doris Day–movie moments, the teacher dialed Mom at work.

“Do you know about this child?” she asked my mother.

*What in the world?* I was paralyzed with fear. I couldn’t imagine causing a problem for my parents. My aunt Ruthie, with her smoking and sneaking out with boys, was the troublemaker in our house. What had I done?

“Patti has a wonderful voice, Mrs. Andrzejewski. A great voice. I think she should be encouraged in music.”

*Whew,* it was the *opposite* of trouble. Instead I was actually having someone validate what I

believed to be true: I knew how to sing.

~~My parents were thrilled with this news. My mother already knew that I could sing, but she'd never interfered, never wanted to impose her views on me. By this age I was fiercely independent, and she was always careful to give me my space. But from then on everybody was all over me like the plague when it came to music. I was groomed to represent the school at all the local and regional competitions. I spent extra hours after school working with the choir teacher on voice training. I love it. I was that little Andrzejewski girl who could sing. I practiced all the time in my upstairs bedroom with the window open, much to the frustration of a boy named Joey who lived across the street. He would throw rocks at my screen and yell up to me, "Andrzejewski, shut up!" Of course, I only sang louder.~~

Maybe it was to help encourage my new interest in music, but the year I was ten my parents got me a red transistor radio for Christmas. Even I couldn't have dreamed up as fine a gift as that red radio, and I couldn't wait to open it—for the second time. By this time I knew that Santa wasn't the one delivering presents on Christmas morning, so I usually went on a hunt to find where Mom was hiding the packages. That year they happened to be under her bed. I got the present out and carefully opened it when she was at work.

I gasped so loud that I'm surprised my grandmother didn't hear me and rush into my parents' bedroom. There it was: a bright red plastic transistor radio. My hands were shaking so hard with the excitement of it that I could barely get the radio wrapped back up. But I did, and she never had a clue (or at least she never let on) that I'd been into her stash of gifts. Of course, that made the time before Christmas drag so much I thought it would never come. But it did, and I acted my part perfectly—shrieking with surprise. The "ohhh"s and "ahhh"s. I was so sneaky. That radio opened up whole new worlds of music to Brenda and me. Suddenly the Stones and the Beatles were a turn of the dial away.

My parents didn't like their music quite that loud. And for quite a while in 1964, all they heard was the Beatles blasting out of my room. I would hear Dad say, "Make her stop that!" Finally Mom would shout: "This is ridiculous! I know all the words to those songs! Shut your door."

Listening to those bands was mind-blowing for me. They were like nothing that I was being trained to sing and nothing that I'd studied. I knew no one who was involved in rock music. No guitar players, no one rehearsing in a garage. I knew about shows that played in New York City, because sometimes the school took us on musical outings. I knew about being in plays, about glee club, about choral groups at the school. And it was through one of those grade school performances that I met a woman who would become almost a surrogate mother to me, most assuredly my musical mentor.

She walked up to me after my solo performance during the spring concert when I was in sixth grade.

"Do you know who I am?" she asked.

"No," I said, although I knew she must be *somebody* because she had a definite air of authority, of importance.

"My name is Georgia Ruel. I'm the high school choir director, and in four years you are *mine*."

Her words alone scared me to death; I couldn't imagine what she meant. As it turned out, what Georgia Ruel meant was business. She took it upon herself to see that I was classically trained, that I had the scholarships and grants for lessons my family couldn't afford. She didn't wait for high school either. She started helping me get the money for private lessons right away, and for the next six years received training that was as good as anyone could buy.

The woman who took immediate charge of my training, Emma Foos, was kind of a stern taskmaster. She was German and could barely speak English. She reminded me of those old black-and-white movies where women of a certain age have boobs that hang right down to the waistline of their housedresses. But she understood classical voice training, and she kicked my butt. Emma had a

pointer that she waved around for emphasis and direction. She also used it to whack my diaphragm if I wasn't giving the exercises my all. She was dead serious about music, and she reminded me of this fact every single day.

For the most part, things went on like that for a few years. Thanks to Georgia Ruel I learned and progressed, while things at home stayed pretty much the way they had always been. That is, until I was fourteen and my only real childhood trauma began to take shape: my parents split up.

At the time my brother and I were completely in the dark about any troubles. Of course, there were always the money problems, and my father was more exhausted than usual. But Andy and I were living in a vacuum, clueless about any storm brewing. There was no fighting, not even an argument that I heard. Everything was just as it had been for years. They worked, came home, and collapsed. I didn't have any idea anything was wrong until I watched my dad walk out the front door carrying two suitcases. I was in a complete state of shock when he left. I just stood there with my mouth open and watched him drive away. And when I finally got myself together enough to demand an answer, Mom's explanation was short.

"Your dad and I are getting a divorce."

The words seemed so foreign it took me a few minutes to realize she'd actually said them out loud. I couldn't believe it. I didn't know what was happening. Not only was I shocked, I was angry.

Perhaps even more shocking was that thirty days later they were back together. They'd gotten a divorce, and then suddenly my dad was back in the picture. He moved home, they remarried, and my mother acted as if nothing had happened. If anything she was a little dismissive about the whole ordeal, and it was never something that we spoke about. I, however, was livid, with the kind of righteous anger fourteen-year-olds are particularly good at. (I should note that my parents then stayed happily married until my father's passing in 2009.)

I WAS JUST STARTING school at Lindenhurst High when my parents divorced and remarried. Instead of using all my pent-up anger as an excuse to act out, I turned more and more to music. Basically, I started high school pissed off and singing for Georgia Ruel.

Of course, when I wasn't singing, I was still completely boy-crazy. My first great teenage love was named Shaun Lynam. He carried my books; we held hands in the hallway and gazed at each other. We were such an item in junior high and the early years of high school. We spent every evening together doing our homework; we went to the movies, went ice-skating, and of course, went to Crud Beach. I went to all the ball games to watch him play basketball, and he came to watch me sing at school events.

We were hot for each other—we did everything imaginable except "the deed." When we finally broke up it was because we both knew we were on the verge of taking our relationship farther, and at fourteen, neither of us wanted to take that step yet. If we kept on seeing each other, it would only lead to trouble, so we both agreed to cut it off.

I liked having one boyfriend at a time, and I wouldn't have been out slutting around for *anything*. But I didn't mind tarding up my image. I started high school in disguise, dressing in what I'd call provocative preppie. I loved those pleated plaid skirts and the madras shirts. Underneath it all, I was closer to Sally Field in *Gidget* or Marlo Thomas in *That Girl*, but I swaggered through the halls looking more like Britney Spears in her first video.

We had a dress code at Lindenhurst High, so I couldn't leave the house looking like that. I had to leave my skirt down below my knees until I got to school. Then I'd be in the bathroom rolling that sucker up as high as I thought I could get by with. (At Lindenhurst, the seniors always gave the

freshmen gifts at the end of the school year, and that year the senior boys gave me a pair of bloomers because I wore such short skirts. Mission accomplished.) It wasn't that I was fishing for attention, because I wasn't; I just had my own look. Even though people would have described me as cute, I was skinny and flat chested with thin hair—nothing like the Italian goddesses who were my friends and populated the school like beautiful ripe figs.

The halls were patrolled by the Matron, a woman who watched us like a hawk, checking to see who'd been rolling up their skirts and demanding we roll them back to a respectable length. If someone had not rolled up her skirt, if it really *was* too short, the Matron swung into action. You had to kneel down in front of her, and if your hem didn't touch the ground, she pulled a seam ripper out of her pocket and let out the hem herself! Then you walked around the rest of the day ragged but right.

Bangs were another sore point with the Matron. I wore them just the way she hated them, right down over my eyelashes. I loved those long bangs that the English models had and thick eyeliner like Sophia Loren wore. I spent most of my time in the halls looking around to see if she was coming so I could brush my bangs to the side. If the Matron thought your bangs were hanging too low, she had another weapon in her pocket: a pair of scissors! She made you stand up against the lockers while she cut your bangs into Mamie Eisenhower territory. No way was I going to let that happen, so I was watchful at every turn. (Can you imagine what would happen today if some adult hall monitor ripped out the hem of a girl's skirt or whacked off her bangs?)

My entire mission with this look was, of course, to make the boys take notice. And they did, especially in choir. When you first walked into the choir room, the singers were lined up in this order: basses, tenors, altos, and sopranos. So I had to parade in front of everyone to get to my spot. I'd start the walk, my short skirt flipping, and the basses and tenors would start with the catcalls: *Andrew-eski*. They were actually yelling "Andrzejewski" except that they couldn't really pronounce it. I'd bat my nicely made-up eyelashes and look sassy.

My high school experience was split up into two parts. Boys were pretty important. I loved to flirt and tease, but I wasn't a backseat type of girl. And then there was music. While I did try sports here and there, Georgia Ruel was having none of it. Swim class? Forget it. The pool might be too cold and I might get a sore throat. Cheerleading? No way. Yelling outside in cold weather might damage my voice.

Georgia also helped to keep me in line when it came to drinking and smoking. My mother was pretty in the dark about what other kids were doing, but Georgia, she knew what was up. I would have been dead if she found out that I'd smoked even just one cigarette, but I wasn't really interested in smoking. Similarly I never had more than a beer or two, because drinking never appealed to me. With the memory of Ruthie's first husband fresh in my mind, I couldn't see the fun in being wasted—only the danger. Georgia reinforced my natural inclinations. With the exception of an occasional highball on New Year's Eve, neither of my parents drank or smoked. Despite being a teenager, my responsible nature just had a way of kicking in when it came to stuff like that. The one time Brenda and I got drunk it was a disaster. It was New Year's Eve, when we were fourteen. I was spending the night and Brenda's parents when out to a party. We managed to consume half a bottle of Seagrams 7, and then spent the remainder of the night alternately trying to stop the room from spinning and throwing up. After that my drinking days were over. Of course, I had friends who did those things, and that was fine, but I knew it wasn't for me.

With no sports, drinking, or smoking, boys and music mostly summed up high school—though there was more music than boys. Every possible minute was devoted to music. Georgia saw to that. She envisioned me becoming a classical singer or going into musical theater. Even though I loved rock music, we never even talked about it. It wasn't just Georgia Ruel's traditional outlook that caused us to avoid the topic of rock; I couldn't envision myself ever singing rock because my voice was all

wrong for it.

The great thing about being in the music program at Lindenhurst was that we made trips to the city to see some musical productions and to hear the symphony and opera—trips that I never would have been able to afford were it not for the school. I sang the solo at a lot of the school programs, and we had an amazing choir. I also sang in the All-State chorus that won prizes throughout the state and kudos from big-time critics. That was all due to Georgia and her brilliant direction. She always pushed me to be better than I was, to work harder than I thought I could, creating a strong work ethic within me. There was no coddling, no cutting me any slack. She knew better than I did what I was capable of doing. And I was lazy. Singing well came easily to me, requiring hardly any effort on my part at all. This was not something I could take credit for; it was just the gift that was given to me. But to reach my potential, I had to work—hard. God and nature had blessed me with raw talent, but it needed to be honed and refined.

And of course, I participated in the school's musical productions, including playing Queen Guinevere in *Camelot*. Because of copyright laws we couldn't always afford to do the biggest productions, and instead we put on vintage shows like *Plain and Fancy* and *Little Mary Sunshine*. We did everything, and it was a good learning experience. I had to learn an Amish accent when I played Hilda Miller, Barbara Cook's part in *Plain and Fancy*. In *West Side Story*, I played Anita, which is hilarious. Anita is the Hispanic girl who has racial insults thrown her way. I am about the whitest person you'd ever meet.

All of this was done with one clear goal: to attend Juilliard and continue my training. But while track never got in the way of my music, boys did.

One boy in particular.

I met Dennis Benatar when I was in the tenth grade, and I thought I was deliriously in love. We dated for the rest of high school, and I did believe this was the *big one*, my great love. What did we have in common? What led me to believe that this was my chance at love? Well, what does a sixteen-year-old girl know about love? I was just another girl who wasn't worldly enough to make a sound choice.

There's a misconception about me that I turned down a scholarship to Juilliard because of Dennis. The fact is, I didn't even go to the audition. To be accepted into Juilliard, you have to go through a lengthy process. You have to learn a lot of pieces, fill out tons of paperwork, make sure all the i's are dotted and the t's crossed. Georgia Ruel walked me through the whole thing. Months went by, and with Georgia's help I was ready. When I started my senior year, the time to audition for Juilliard drew near, but in September of our senior year, the unthinkable happened. Dennis enlisted. Remember, this was 1971, and the Vietnam War was still going on.

The Juilliard audition was coming up in November, yet all I could think of was Vietnam. I thought Dennis would be sent to war and he would be killed. It may have been Mom's old fatalistic worldview, but I know a great many young people went through those exact same emotions back then. Everything just exploded, and I didn't think I could do anything except stay with him until we got through this nightmare. Every time I brought it up, Dennis pleaded with me to stay with him, to just blow off the audition, asking me not to go. And so I didn't.

I would almost have rather done anything in the world but face Georgia Ruel with the news of my decision. She was my closest confidant, as good a friend as any I had in high school. Over the last several years, I'd spent most of my free time with her. If I wasn't in a class, I was in the choir room with Georgia. She gave me the dynamics and the fundamentals of my music, but she also had become an older sister. She was my mentor, my teacher, and my friend.

"I've decided not to audition for Juilliard."

Georgia looked sick. "You can't mean that."

“Yes. Dennis may have to go to Vietnam. We’re going to get married.”

“You haven’t thought this through,” Georgia began. She went on and on, eventually breaking down into tears and trying in vain to convince me to think over my decision. But for me that was the end of it. My mind was made up. Everything I’d worked for since I was ten years old was about to be thrown out the window. I would stick with Dennis, who might be sent to Vietnam to fight and die.

Not long after I’d made my decision, I began to second-guess why I’d ever even thought I could make it at Juilliard in the first place. I tried to justify and rationalize my choice. *What was I thinking? How could a kid from a blue-collar family with two working parents fit in at a place like Juilliard? I probably wasn’t good enough anyway. I might not have been accepted. In fact, it’s almost a certainty that I wouldn’t have been accepted.* Before it was over, I had convinced myself that this was the very best move I could have made. And I was being loyal to my great love.

After graduation, Dennis went to basic training and I decided to live at home and attend the State University of New York at Stony Brook. I took health education and sex-ed classes, thinking I’d become a teacher, but my attendance was short-lived and I quit during my first semester to take a job waitressing at Friendly’s. I needed to save money for the wedding, which I knew my parents would not have been able to afford and I never would have asked them to pay for. Music faded into the far past, something I’d done in another life. Dennis and I had planned on getting married in November, but in September he was sent to Vietnam. That rolled the wedding date to the following summer, 1972, when he was to return.

Much to both of our surprise, he was back in three months and changed a great deal, now facing long bouts of depression. I didn’t know any of the details of why he only stayed three months, but I assumed it was because of the depression and anxiety. This has been such a pattern, soldiers coming back from war suffering from post-traumatic stress. In the old days they called it shell shock. Without professional help, it does not get better. One of the most tragic aspects of PTSD is that instead of getting therapy, so many of these young men self-medicate with drugs or alcohol. And that is what Dennis did. I smoked pot a few times with him. I wanted to help him, support him, and show him that I understood what he was going through. It was an act of solidarity, but it just wasn’t me. I hated being stoned, so I stopped smoking, but he did not.

But while his life had changed dramatically, mine was staying the same. I had been at home, in our town, working to pay for the wedding. The chasm between us had widened, but I didn’t see it. I was too blinded by missing him and wanting to leave my home and get out into the world. The marriage seemed like an exit. Because it was obvious that our lives had split in two different directions, I should have put the wedding on hold until we knew whether we were still suited for each other. But I didn’t. The wedding was still scheduled for the end of July 1972.

I knew the day we wed that I was making a terrible mistake.

I can still remember that feeling when the church doors opened and I set my foot down on the carpet. I looked up and saw the man I thought I wanted to marry and suddenly my brain said, *Run!* But there I was putting one foot in front of the other walking down that aisle. *No, no, no!* my brain kept screaming at me.

The next thing I knew I was reciting my vows. Then he was kissing the bride. And I spent the next eight years in and out of a bad marriage.

I’ve told both my daughters to watch for that feeling and trust it. I don’t care how many people have been invited to the wedding, or what relatives drove for half a day to get there, or what kind of wine you ordered. If you start down that aisle and something says, *Don’t do this*, turn around and run.

“I’m giving you my permission right now,” I’ve told them. “You have my permission to stop it at any point, and I don’t care about the circumstances.”

The way I figure it, the band will already be there, the food will already be there. We’ll all be



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