



*A Memoir
of Family,
Fame, and
Floundering*

UNTIED

MEREDITH BAXTER

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Author's Note

I have told the truth about my story as best I can recall and up to a point. There are a few names I have changed to ensure privacy. There are some incidents that have been truncated or eliminated because full disclosure is often tedious, dreary, and redundant.

A few of my children posited their opinion that for me to write about my life automatically meant I was writing about theirs, which I think they experienced as a form of trespass. So although our lives are inextricably linked, I tried to limit telling my children's stories because, after all, those stories are not mine to tell. In truth, I felt awkward even writing about their feelings or perceptions, believing it was not my right to represent them with any particular slant. Consequently in this book, for the most part, I've avoided talking much about them at all, which belies that they were and are the center of my life; they have taught me great love, patience, and compassion, which have shaped me in the richest ways.

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Prologue

On the night of November 31, 2009, I was sitting in the bathtub at the Four Seasons Hotel in midtown Manhattan, having a meltdown. The following morning I was supposed to go on the *Today Show* so I could come out on national television. Even my partner of four years, Nancy Locke, was concerned for me. Would it look like a pathetic career move? Would it look like a desperate bid for attention? Were there factions in my family that didn't yet know? How would people in the industry look at me now? Would I look foolish? Would my waning career be perceived as going up in a small ignoble puff of smoke? I was fraught with uncertainty.

It was the offer of two free tickets to the Caribbean a few weeks earlier on the inaugural voyage of Sweet, a lesbian cruise line, which had culminated in my sitting in this now lukewarm tub in New York City. The web series I was appearing in, *We Have to Stop Now*, would be filming more episodes on the cruise; would I like to join them and film some added scenes? I was a little wary of being so exposed on a lesbian cruise, but it took very little discussion for Nancy and me to decide we really wanted to go. So I called the show's producers, took a deep breath, and said, "We're in!"

We departed out of New Orleans and headed to Mexico, sailing right into Hurricane Ida. Our huge ocean liner was tossed around like a Coke can and Nancy and I just held on to each other for dear life but we made it through to Belize City, then to Honduras, then back to Cozumel. We had so much fun. Nancy and I kept it low key, reading, sitting in the sun, enjoying the day trips, meeting new people. I knew that there was press on board as well as a lot of cameras, but except for the few scenes I had to do, we steered clear of them. On the last night of the seven-day cruise, we saw our amazingly funny friend, comic Suzanne Westenhoefer, perform. At the end of her act, she looked out into the crowd and, echoing the words of gay rights activist Harvey Milk, said, "Come out. If you're not out, come out."

Okay ... that got me. I had been struggling with the idea for some time. I was on a lesbian cruise, but who was I really out to? I had been letting my friends and family know since 2003. But I wasn't out to the world; I always told myself I had too much at stake. At that moment, I looked at Nancy, my darling Nancy, who had been out for thirty years, and I just knew it was time.

That night, back in our cabin, I started flailing around for a plan. I'd put an ad in the newspaper! I was thinking it should be modest, sort of like a birth announcement, and I could say something like, "Hey ... Just thought I'd let you know I'm gay, (signed) Meredith Baxter."

We returned home to Los Angeles on Sunday, November 15. On Monday morning, I put a call into the office of my manager, Alan Iezman, to broach the idea of the coming-out process and what that might look like. Well, Alan had wanted to talk to *me* because he'd already gotten some calls from *National Enquirer*, *Star*, and the celebrity gossip website *PerezHilton*. They all knew that I was on the cruise, and they had photographs of me and Nancy. No! That was my worst nightmare!

My manager suggested I talk to Howard Bragman, a well-known Hollywood publicist who

specialized in guiding celebrities through the coming-out process. Howard's first words were "Well, aren't you full of surprises?" Then he said, "We have to take control of the story or you will have no say in it at all." He said, "We'll get you into *People* magazine and then we go to New York and you'll do the *Today Show*." No! This was horrible! This was even worse than the *Enquirer*!

What? No ad? A major *network*? A major *publication*? No, no, no. *This isn't warranted!* This was way over the top. But Howard was already moving. "First I have to see if the *Today Show* wants you." Fifteen minutes later, he called me back and said, "The *Today Show* wants you and they want you *next week*, so we have to get *People* magazine over to your house within the next few days." I didn't have time to react. This was appalling but—I just went on stunned autopilot. "Okay. Okay."

Cut back to me crying and now shivering in the Four Seasons bathtub. *Why am I doing this? Why should anybody have to do this?* I just wailed. I was going to make a most personal announcement on national television and people were going to say, "Her? *Family Ties* has been off the air for twenty years. Who cares?"

Then Nancy came in and talked to me as I wept. Nancy talked about the shame she felt when she first came out, how she hid being gay from those around her because she was scared how they would react. She told me how comforting it would have been to her back then to see someone like me, a known actress, someone people seemed to like, coming forward and being open about who they were.

Ah. This could be helpful? This was *being of service*? As long as I kept a tight focus on the bigger picture, it made what was about to happen much more meaningful and relevant, almost spiritual. Research has shown that when people have a friend or someone in the family who is gay, they seem more open to gay issues. All right, I haven't been in the limelight for a while, but people do still seem to respond to me. So maybe people will think "Oh, Meredith. I like her! She's nonthreatening! She's friendly! She talks to you! So, she's gay! She was the same as she was before we knew; nothing has changed."

And perhaps, the next time those people will go to vote, they'll think about me and other gay people they know, and perhaps they won't so quickly vote away gay marriage rights, maybe they'll vote with real equality in mind.

And perhaps, for someone who's been fearful of coming out, this will give him or her the courage to take the next step. Okay. I can do this.

I'd met *Today Show* host Matt Lauer back in 2008 when he interviewed Gary David Goldberg, the creator of *Family Ties*, me, and the rest of the *Family Ties* cast for our 20 Year Later reunion. So, before the interview began, I asked for a few minutes with Matt. He couldn't have been lovelier to me. He said, "Boy, I didn't see this coming. I'm here with you and Meredith. This is fine. It's all going to be great."

When we were seated on the set, I looked out the window behind Matt where New Yorkers congregate outside the studio, waiting to watch the show, and they were all excitedly waving and yelling, "Hi!" NBC was pretaping my segment and, since this episode wasn't going to air for a couple of days, our conversation wasn't piped outside, but I couldn't help imagining the live TV scenario: the crowd would be watching and waving, trying to get my attention, and then I'd blurt out, "I'm a lesbian!" The smiles would collapse and the waving hands would quickly be stuffed back into pockets and *whoosh*, the crowd would disperse. That's what would

going through my mind as the cameras started rolling.

Matt Lauer gave me a nice intro, something like, “She’s one of the most beloved TV moms of all time” and “This morning she’s going to disclose something.” He looked at me expectantly and I was horrified. I might have said, “Don’t you *know*? Do I have to *say it*?” After a bit of stammering I just spoke from my heart. I announced that I was a lesbian, that had been a later-in-life discovery. I said I hadn’t fought the discovery but embraced it, that had clarified some aspects of my relationships with men. I told of my wonderful relationships with Nancy and the unqualified love and support I’d found in my family and friends. I said I felt that coming out like that, on the *Today Show*, was a political act and that perhaps knowing I was a lesbian might free people to be more generous and understanding of the rights of others in the gay, lesbian, and transgender community. I hadn’t memorized anything, but I think I said everything I wanted to say. Then it was over and I wondered, “Did I just set myself on fire on national television?”

Nancy and I walked out of NBC into a gentle, calming winter drizzle, leaving all the hoopla behind us. We were high and shaky on the adrenaline of the morning. Strolling the city streets, huddled together under a large umbrella as taxis swooshed by, was the perfect antidote. We watched people ice-skate; we window-shopped; we lunched in a bistro; I bought some great cheap boots and then we wandered into Tiffany’s on Fifth Avenue. It was packed with shoppers on each floor. Like everyone else, we tried on jewelry. I really liked a square silver ring with some letters stamped on it. It read T & Co. I didn’t have my reading glasses with me—it looked like TACO, which I thought was a pretty whimsical touch for such a highfalutin outfit. Nancy found a similar ring, with the same letters, but round and convex. We bought each other rings to commemorate the day and wandered back out into the rain.

Over the next few weeks, I started to give some thought to writing about this experience. About two years earlier, the subject of my writing a book had been broached by someone I work with. So I toyed with doing something slim showing my paintings and drawings, and perhaps throw in some fab recipes and a few words of pithy, learned wisdom appropriate to each. I had even made a few selections from my artwork but never really moved beyond that because the project felt just a little lifeless and nonspecific. What would be different now? I didn’t want to just write about the coming-out experience. I hoped I had more to offer than that. (Although, if you googled me, you’d think that announcing I was a lesbian was just about the only thing I’d ever done.) What have I learned in my sixty-three years? I’ll tell you the truth, everything I know I learned in a 12-step program or therapy. So I decided I could talk about my life and how I changed my thinking.

As a child I was held captive by feelings of fear, shame, anger, loneliness, and a profound sense of being unloved. I developed a belief system about myself based on these feelings that shaped and directed the trajectory of my entire life. I was defined by that thinking and undone by it. Every decision and relationship was governed by it. I decided I wanted to write about where the belief system sprang from, the choices I made because of it, and how, slowly over time, it is metamorphosing. For years, I saw myself as a victim; I wanted *you* to see me as a victim too, because if I were a victim, then I wasn’t responsible, was I? Learning to accept responsibility for myself and my choices has been a rough and often reluctant path to trudge but the rewards have been copious and surprising. Becoming healthier and more mature, I attract like people. I’m no longer looking for someone or something outside myself

to make me okay; I'm discovering I'm just fine as I am.

It is a lifelong process, thank goodness, because I'd hate to think I had to be done anytime soon; I still have work to do. And it is a spiritual experience. I believe that when something as deeply ingrained as my belief system changes, it has to come from a power greater than me. Which, really, shouldn't have been hard to find.



(Left to right) My parents, Nancy and Tom Baxter, with Brian, Richard, and me, 1947.

To know me, you must first know my mother, Nancy Ann Whitney. More than anything else, my mother wanted to be an actress—a *famous* actress—which in the 1950s was all about being young, sexy, and available. She was all that, and more. She had big blue eyes, alabaster skin, a heart-shaped face, a beautiful figure. She was just a knockout.

But my mother seemed to feel there was an obstacle to her making it in show business in Hollywood. Children. And she had three of them by the time she was twenty-three—my two older brothers, Dick and Brian, and me. The fact that we existed made her seem older than she was. Her solution was to have us call her by her new stage name, Whitney Blake. We were not to call her “Mommy” anymore. We were to call her Whitney. I think she was hoping if we called her that, people might assume she was our aunt or maybe an older sister.

I can remember coming home from first grade, walking through the front door of our little white Craftsman-style house on Indiana Avenue in South Pasadena, and calling out, “Mommy, I’m home!”

No answer. I was confused; her car was out front. I stood very still.

“Mommy, I’m home!”

Still nothing. Then I remembered.

“Whitney?”

“Yes, dear?” her musical voice rang out from the middle bedroom, where she kept a vanity table at which she’d do her makeup.

Although I believe she had no idea about the psychological impact this might have on her children, now that I’m older I realize that Whitney was probably just giving us what she got. Whitney’s mother was born Martha Mae Wilkerson—my brothers and I called her Memaw.

She was a scrappy, tough, smart, and wily survivor. She wasn't the soft, fuzzy type; she didn't coddle Whitney and she didn't coddle me. Whenever I would complain about my clothes, like girls do, Memaw would tell me in her dry, crackly voice, "When I was little I had a red dress and a blue dress. When I was wearin' the red dress, I washed and ironed the blue dress. When I was wearin' the blue dress, I washed and ironed the red one. I didn't have choices."

Memaw was from Arkansas and married five times over the course of her life. She kept burying husbands (and sometimes I think there should be some exhumations to find out why). Whitney was only six when her real dad, Harry C. Whitney, a Secret Service man who guarded President Woodrow Wilson, died from alcoholism. Memaw's replacement husbands came at such a clip that Whitney never formed much of an attachment to any of them.

One of her stepfathers, Al, patented a fitting for oil rigs—his last name was Well, ironically. He and Memaw would drift from oil field to oil field around the country. Sometimes they'd drag Whitney and her younger brother, Buddy, along. Just as often Memaw would leave her kids behind, once with a couple of former missionaries and another time with her elementary school teacher.

It wasn't until the fifth grade that Whitney discovered drama class, when the boy who was supposed to play Oberon in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* came down with a case of stage fright and she took over the role. From that day forward, Whitney realized that no matter what school she was in, the drama department would become home until Memaw announced it was time to pull up stakes and move again. Whitney said that the nearest thing she had to a real family when she was growing up were the casts of the plays that she appeared in.

Whitney was instead devoted to her brothers and sisters of the theater. One story she delighted in telling was about the time she was appearing in a Pasadena City College production that had a furniture dilemma: one scene needed a table, chairs, and a couch for the set, and none could be located. On opening night, Memaw shows up to watch her daughter perform, and when the curtain rises, she sees her entire living room set onstage. How Whitney managed to get the furniture out of her mother's house without anyone noticing is one thing. To reveal it in such a fashion required real chutzpah, which Whitney had in spades.

So in a way, Whitney's maternal model was someone who put her ambition ahead of her maternal responsibilities, and that's how she was with us. Dick, Brian, and I didn't talk about it much; we just lived it. It's what *was*. My brother Dick, the eldest, is very philosophical about her. He says, "Well, she did the best she could." But I think Brian and I took her actions more personally. They really shaped me; I had a strong sense of having been abandoned by her, that she didn't want me, that she didn't want to be my mother.

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My mother was so intent on becoming an actress that eventually even Memaw got on board and told her that after she graduated from high school, she'd support her financially for one year. After that she would be on her own. Whitney attended the lower division of Pasadena City College, a sort of accelerated high school program for students interested in the performing arts, and she helped out at the college radio station, which was where she met my father, Tom Baxter. Just after Whitney turned eighteen, she got her high school diploma.

she and Tom got married, and Whitney was finally able to move away from her mother. My father supported his rapidly growing family as an engineer with the Southern Pacific Railroad and later as a sound engineer specializing in live radio and television.

A couple of times, when I was very young, I visited my dad's studio at the ABC Radio Center on Vine Street in Hollywood. He would sit in his booth with a bank of electronic equipment in front of him, monitoring whatever show was on the air. He sat in front of a large window, through which he could watch the actors read from their scripts in the sound booth. He loved to tell about the pranks he pulled that invariably involved compromising the actors while they were recording. This was my favorite story: Because the rustle of papers to be avoided in radio, anyone reading from a script typically holds the script pages in their left hand, separates the page to be read with the right, and holds that page next to the microphone, speaking directly into the mike. When that page is finished, it is allowed to waft silently to the floor and the reader continues with the next page. So, midrecording, my father would quietly enter the actor's sound booth and set fire to the top of the single page being read, which would initiate a kind of race for the actor to calmly read his lines before the paper burned up the text, while not betraying any tension to the listening audience.

My father said that he quit the business in the fifties when radio and television went to tape because it ceased to be fun. I think there was nothing for him to set fire to.

By 1953, after about ten years, my parent's marriage was on its last legs and Whitney filed for divorce. I was only five. The last day my father lived with us, my mother was away from the house, and he was in a state of turmoil and despair, just pacing, pacing, pacing. He sat my brothers and me down in the living room and said very seriously, "When I leave, you're never going to see me again." We all started crying like crazy.

My father was hurt, his life had fallen apart. I think his drama-filled master plan must have been to have Whitney return home to find her husband gone and her children sobbing inconsolably because she'd driven him away.

Before my father made his grand exit, without telling us he called my mother to tell her to come home, that we kids were alone. So when he drove away, we were scared and Dick called the only number we knew, which was our grandmother's, our father's mother. My grandparents arrived at the house followed closely by Whitney and Art, a guy she was having an affair with. Bedlam ensued with lots of yelling, accusations, and hysteria, and that was the end of my nuclear family.

Being single with three kids didn't mean that Whitney gave up on her hopes of becoming a star. She was dedicated and a hard worker. She worked as a bookkeeper and stenographer at the Lockheed Aircraft plant during the day, but at night she'd take acting classes and appear in plays at small local theaters like the Pasadena Playhouse, leaving us in the care of a string of housekeepers and friends. When she couldn't find anyone to watch us, she'd take us kids with her and we'd entertain ourselves in the dusty prop room, wardrobe room, and the cavernous wings and bowels of the theater until she was ready to go home. I remember those times fondly because not only were all of us siblings playing together but I also knew exactly where my mother was.



Although she herself was independent, Memaw's biggest message to Whitney when she

was growing up had been: You need to find a man to take care of you. With my father out of the house, Whitney decided that my eldest brother, Dick, had the right chromosomal make-up—forget that he was about eight at the time—to fit the bill. She told him, “You are now the man of the family.” But she kept looking for grown-up men as well; there were always plenty of them around our house, guys she’d met at class or in Playhouse productions. I remember two in particular: Ray, whom I liked because he fixed our sagging garage door, and red-haired Art, whom I didn’t like. He mocked my fear of the rats that sometimes crawled out of our attic and ran across our backyard.

After the divorce, my father, Tom, remained part of our lives, but a small part. We’d see him every other weekend, and on the occasional Wednesday he’d pick us up after school and take us to his mother’s house in Pasadena.

That grandmother’s name was Jean Lawson Baxter and there was nothing soft about her either. (What is it with my grandmothers?) She always spoke regretfully of being called Grandmother, instead of Memaw, the moniker she was hoping for. Unaccountably we called her husband Pepaw, but it was my maternal grandmother who was dubbed Memaw. Consequently, I always felt a silent competition between these strong women, whose paths rarely, if ever, crossed. Grandmother was tall, stout, formidable, very old, and had white hair that she wore circled and pinned. She didn’t try to hide the fact that she had never been Whitney’s biggest fan. One of my clearest memories is of her standing in the middle of our little house on Indiana Avenue, running her fingers over the mantel, saying negative things about Whitney and making it clear that she didn’t think much of her housekeeping skills. She was never above interrogating me, either. She would sit me down on her porch swing and ask questions about Whitney—“Was she home at night?” “Were we left alone?”—making me feel very defensive. I didn’t always understand her questions, but the tone was unmistakable. To my grandmother, as pious and self-righteous as she was, Whitney must have seemed irresponsible, flighty, and downright non-Christian.

Grandmother was too stern, imperious even, to bring much real coziness into our lives when we were little, but she did try. Once as a gift she gave me a pair of large, beautiful but fairly fragile, hand-painted boudoir dolls, more appropriate for window dressing than play. They were blond and brunette, stood about two feet high, and were dressed in gorgeous long-sleeved satin and lace dresses. Though they were quite valuable in their day, I played with them until their gowns hung in tatters and their wigs were askew. At a certain point I decided that the dolls needed friends, so she made me two male dolls, sort of in the style of Raggedy Andy, with suits, ties, and shirts. But their faces were flat, and when I asked her to give them features, she obliged by figuring out how to gather the material together and make a seal that gave them little noses.

In my grandparents’ long, deep yard was a huge two-story garage. On the second floor of it, my father had built and painted a complex miniature electric model railroad setup, complete with papier-mâché rocks and mountains, plastic forests and houses, railroad stations, streams, small towns, and small townsfolk. It was magical. On rare occasions, he’d delight us by taking us up there, where, in the attic’s hot motionless air, he’d let us stand on stools with our heads poking up between the mountains and watch as he made the trains traverse the rails around some snowcapped peaks down into a sagebrushy desert to the depot. There a train would take on water or perhaps let go a few cattle cars, then proceed on

through a valley with livestock and a few ranches. We weren't allowed to touch, but I drank it in whenever he'd allow.

Grandmother and Pepaw, who was barely a presence, had a little one-room playhouse built for us. This small gesture, this act of making something just for my brothers and me, loomed so large in my tiny psyche that years later, when I was filming *Family*, and realized that we were shooting less than two miles away, I had to scratch that nostalgic itch and go visit.

My grandmother's house was at 95 Columbia Street in Pasadena. For some reason I have in my memory that they'd bought the house in 1900 for \$800, a tidy sum in those days. It was a beautiful old Victorian house, white clapboard with beveled glass fans over windows and doors. I'd remembered it as huge and imposing: steep steps up to the grand pillared porch and a very heavy, important oak door. What I found on the day I visited was a less imposing house with the beautiful beveled windows and a cement porch with three steps leading up to it, flanked by two modest round white supports and a heavy, important oak door.

On which I knocked. An older woman came to the door and when I explained who I was and that I'd largely grown up in her house, she was most gracious and invited me to come in and look around. What luck! On the left of the entry were the drawing rooms, divided by high pocket doors, which still slid silently closed as smoothly as if made yesterday. To the right another set of stairs I'd remembered as steep and threatening seemed so tame. Upstairs I was aghast to see that the heavy porcelain claw-foot bathtub had been replaced with a shower and countertop of turquoise Formica. Another room had a wall covered with a woven fabric peeling just a bit, and a zebra print rug on the floor. Okay, enough of the house. I had to see the playhouse.

Unbelievably, it was still standing. The owner couldn't find the key, but the windows were open, and when I stuck my head in it was like Marcel Proust's famous bite of the "petites madeleines." The musty smell instantly took me back in time and there I was with my brother Brian, reading stacks and stacks of Big Little Books or playing school with my grandmother's companion, Kate Frazier.

Back in Springfield, Missouri, where my grandmother was from, she and Kate ran a boardinghouse together. When my grandparents moved out to California in 1900 with baby Tom and his elder sister, Jinny, Kate came with them to help look after little Tom. In fact when Dick, Brian, and I would spend the night, I would sleep in Kate's room, which faced the street and had a big cut-glass fan window. This was wonderful to me because Kate was probably the first person I ever felt bonded to. In the constellation of an elusive mother, unsmiling grandmothers, and faceless housekeepers, Kate was the only grown-up who seemed to want to be with me. I remember her sweet patient old face and small, wrinkly, blue-veined hands. I'd trace the veins, pushing gently on them, marveling at how soft, pliant, and collapsible they were. And she'd let me. Unlike Grandmother, who usually seemed to have high expectations of us little ones, that we should live up to some kind of standard, Kate was just loving.

When pretend class would be in session out in the back playhouse, I would be the seven-year-old know-it-all teacher and Kate would dutifully make mistake after mistake, which I corrected with exasperation and rolling eyes. When Kate would bake pies in the big kitchen in the main house, she would collect all the leftover bits of dough and make crisp piecrust cookies for us that she'd sprinkle with powdered sugar and cinnamon. I make them too,

this day, every time I bake a pie.

Many years ago, Whitney told me that once divorced from my father, she'd wanted to relocate from Pasadena to Hollywood to fully pursue her career but was afraid to move there as a single woman. She said it wouldn't be smart and she felt vulnerable, that it might not "look right" for a pretty young thing to come to town unprotected. And that was why she latched onto Jack.

My mother met Jack X (the lack of a period was what he called his signature) Fields, a theatrical agent, when he came to see her in her first professional part: a production of *The Women* at the Hollywood Playhouse on Las Palmas. Jack must have seen promise in Whitney's performance because afterward he sent word backstage that he'd like to represent her. Jack was not an attractive man, but he was six feet tall, distinguished-looking, graceful, and solidly built like the boxer he'd once been. Most important, he believed in Whitney enough to orchestrate for her a Hollywood-style makeover.

He came up with the stage name of Whitney Blake. He had her lighten her dark hair blonde and—as I saw one day in the second grade when she came to pick me up—get a nose job. It's a vivid memory: her hair was curled, she was wearing high heels and a tight gray pencil skirt, and there was a big bandage over the center of her face.

With that, the transformation from regular pretty girl to dazzling ingenue was complete. In fact, she'd often be mistaken for Kim Novak or Carroll Baker.

A year after they met, Whitney and Jack were married, and we moved from our small South Pasadena bungalow on Indiana Avenue to a ritzy (for us) split-level hillside house at 6722 Whitley Terrace in the Hollywood Hills. It was unbelievable: We walked into the house upstairs! In our new house, the master bedroom, kitchen, and dining room were on the top floor and the kid's bedrooms and an elegant all-white living room and bar were downstairs. There was a big, sloped terraced yard and a view of the Hollywood Bowl parking lot. I remember my brothers and I went crazy when we first moved in ... running up and down the yard steps ... hiding in bushes ... racing through the house ... and getting lost. It was so much grander than the modest house we'd come from.

After our move, Whitney's television career started to take off. We had a series of housekeepers but she basically abdicated child-rearing responsibilities to Jack. She was busy guest-starring on popular TV dramas like *Whirlybirds* and *Circus Boy*. In "The Case of the Restless Redhead," she played a café waitress named Evelyn Bagby, who is wrongly accused of murder and seeks the help of Perry Mason in the hard-boiled legal drama's premiere episode of that series. I don't remember seeing her much in those days, just a few images of her in curlers rushing off to work early.

When I was much younger, I'd get in front of my class at school to tell the kids my mother was going to be on television. I think I was hoping this would earn me some friends and admiration; my subtext was always: Do you like me now? When I was older, in junior high school though, I switched to telling kids my mother was Anne Baxter. No one recognized the name Whitney Blake. Anne Baxter sounded like she actually *could* be my mother. And *she'd* won an Academy Award.

Jack had been an air force colonel during World War II and the Korean War, so, in lieu of

any previous experience in bringing up youngsters, he practiced a bullying, militaristic, influenced style of parenting that involved endless lists and schedules. What time we had to get up. What time to brush our teeth. What time to make breakfast. Who was to make breakfast. What time we were supposed to leave for school. What time we were to be home. The chores we had to complete. Whose turn it was to feed our three pet dachshunds, Faust, Tina, and Oedipus.

When I neglected to clean my room properly, I lost it; I forfeited any right to enter it for a period of days or weeks. On those nights Jack had me sleep in the “den,” which was really a part of the basement, a damp unfinished room built into the side of the hill; there were exposed overhead pipes and a dirt wall. I’d make a bed as close as possible to the door, bring in a lamp and a radio, and pray for daylight.

This, however, was preferable to what happened when my brothers forgot to put out the trash on collection day, which on rare occasions they would. Jack’s way of making sure they’d never forget again was to take the garbage cans out of the garage, lug them through the kitchen, then down the stairs and up the hall, and deposit them in my brothers’ bedroom. And there, not two feet from where my brothers slept—and these were the days before incinerator sink disposals and plastic trash bags—the cans of rotting, week-old garbage sat, the sound of writhing larvae and maggots growing louder and the stench worsening. It was Jack’s plan to leave the garbage cans there until collection day the following week, but nature intervened. When fastidious Jack saw that maggots were wriggling out of the can and onto the carpet, he had them move the cans out into the hallway. Eventually he gave up and ordered my brothers to return the bins back to the garage where they belonged.

Jack controlled most elements of our lives. We weren’t allowed to argue. We weren’t allowed to be angry. We learned the hard way about why we should be wary of him when his back was turned. Over the years, one of my brothers or I would make the mistake of trying to get his attention by approaching and tapping him from behind. He would spin around and punch us in the stomach with a closed fist and then apologize. “Oh, sorry,” he would say. “It’s my boxer instincts. Don’t do that.”

There were also infractions that Jack considered so egregious they could be remedied only by sending the transgressor out to the backyard to collect a thin branch from a big carob tree and bring it inside to him. Then he’d administer an old-school whipping on the backs of our legs. I understood the concept of “If kids do something wrong, they should be disciplined.” But with Jack, the punishment rarely fit the crime. One trip I took out to the carob tree occurred after Jack found out that I bought candy after promising him that I wouldn’t. I paid the price by being switched and arriving at school the next day with ugly red welts on my calves.

When Brian was about ten, I can remember Jack taking him into the downstairs den and switching him until his pained cries could be heard all over the house. I thought someone had to save him, so I ran up the stairs until I could see the door to Whitney and Jack’s room. The door was closed. I knew she was in there. The policy was that if the door were open, you could knock on it and see if anyone answered. But if the door were closed, that meant Don’t Even Knock. We did not ever, under any circumstances, walk in. So many times, I remember standing on the stairs, just watching that door, willing it to open; willing her to notice what was going on in our house.

If there ever was a pure Hollywood agent, it was Jack. On one hand he was a master manipulator, the kind of guy who liked pulling strings, making things happen quietly behind the scenes. He'd build his credit by exacting favors when needed. Because I found him so harsh, I was surprised to discover that he actually had another dimension. In the late '40s and early '50s, when blacklisting was at the height of its power, he lent a hand to many folks who'd found themselves on the wrong side of the House Un-American Activities Committee who were blacklisted for supposedly being Communists or Communist sympathizers and unable to find work in Hollywood. Jack helped actors like Zero Mostel, Jack Gilford, Woodrow Strode, Marsha Hunt, and Strother Martin get back on their feet by finding them gigs on commercials and other work situations.

And there was Jack's Home for Wayward Actors, a little guest room off our backyard where Jack would install clients who were between jobs. I'm not sure how the wonderful character actor Frank Silvera ended up there, but he was one of our more permanent residents. He stayed with us for about two years so we teasingly called him The Man Who Came to Dinner. He appeared in everything from Elia Kazan's *Viva Zapata!* to the action-adventure classic *Mutiny on the Bounty*, and the hilarious part was that in every movie Frank was cast as a different ethnicity. Black and born in Kingston, Jamaica, he managed to sidestep being racially pigeonholed because he was so light-skinned. In one film he'd play a Mexican heavy and in the next he'd show up as a Native American.

Memaw, who grew up in Arkansas and was not known for her racial tolerance, didn't know what to make of Frank. On his first Thanksgiving with us, we were all seated around the table and Frank was sitting next to Memaw. We noticed she'd been watching him attentively out of the corner of her eye. She leaned in very close to him and said hopefully, "Maybe you're ... *Polynesian*?" And Frank, possibly the sweetest man in the world, put her at ease with, "Why yes, maybe I am."

When I was in the seventh grade, Jack asked me if I'd like to audition for a television series. I was beside myself with excitement over the idea; it sounded like so much fun! NBC was doing a half-hour black-and-white television remake of the 1944 family classic movie *National Velvet*, which had made a huge star out of Elizabeth Taylor, and I was going to audition for the lead part of Velvet. Jack prevailed on Frank, our handy in-house actor, to help prepare me for my scene.

When it came to acting coaches, I couldn't have found one more gentle, encouraging, and patient than Frank. I owe him a debt of gratitude for a good part of what followed. For several days, Frank and I sat in the dining room, rehearsing the long monologue I was going to give. It was a very emotional speech and I'd had no acting experience, but I threw myself into this task with total abandon. More than nine hundred child actors tried out and I was one of four who made it to the screen test. Three other young girls and I were sent to the hair and makeup department, where they tinted our hair so we'd look just like Velvet did in the movie. The jet-black rinse was so cheap that it turned my hair brush gray and left a soot shadow on my pillow. But I thought I looked sultry; I thought that with my blue eyes and newly darkened hair I looked terribly glamorous.

On the day we all showed up for our screen tests, I guess I did my scene as required but what I remember most was the great fun the four of us girls had as we ran around the NBC

studio lot. We were a quartet of nearly identical black-haired girls hyped up on adrenaline and postaudition exhilaration, racing around the cavernous soundstages and shrieking in unison. It was such a thrill to be running around with other kids, being part of a happy group pack instead of the quiet loner at Le Conte Junior High School.

After several days of anguished waiting, Jack called me into the living room and told me that I didn't get the part. Apparently, they didn't want me to star in their series because I didn't know how to comport myself. I'd played around the studio lot too much. I was unprofessional.

"Oh, all right," I said to Jack as coolly as I possibly could.

Then I went downstairs to my room and collapsed. I sobbed for hours. I was blindsided. It never occurred to me that I wouldn't get it. I'd blown it horribly. Jack said I was "irresponsible" and "unprofessional." I was wracked with humiliation. Rejected at twelve.

Only recently did I find out what might have *really* happened. The girl who landed the part was named Lori Martin and had been acting professionally since she was six. (Which was six more years of acting experience than I had.) I also read that after dyeing Lori's hair she was the mirror image of an adolescent Liz Taylor. In other words, the producers didn't necessarily reject me because I'd misbehaved. They probably went with the most seasoned young actress who also happened to be a ringer for a popular movie star.

How like Jack to leave me with the imprint of a self-inflicted loss. I might have fared better if I were a Communist.



In Traverse City as a summer stock intern, age seventeen.

So my big break didn't happen. It was back to the seventh grade for me. Meanwhile, Whitney's star continued to rise. For a while, it seemed like you couldn't turn on the TV without seeing her on popular shows like *The Millionaire* and *77 Suns Strip*. An entire Whitney montage could have been assembled of her waltzing around in period costumes on every high-rated western series—*Rawhide*, *Cheyenne*, *Bronco*, *Maverick*, *Pony Express*.

The show she really loved doing was *M Squad*, a moody, black-and-white cop show starring Lee Marvin, on which she guest-starred at least once a season. Marvin played Lt. Frank Ballinger, a scowling plainclothes tough guy from Chicago who wore a bent felt fedora. Whitney would play characters like a coldly glamorous girlfriend of a murdered mob lawyer, requiring her to be flirtatious, conniving, sneaky, vulnerable, and frightened and maybe even die, sadly, at the end. Those roles had real dramatic arcs; they involved real acting and they thrilled her.

The exciting guest spots ended, though, in 1961 when Jack got Whitney cast as a regular on *Hazel*, a new CBS sitcom starring Oscar-winner Shirley Booth as Hazel Burke, a problem-solving maid who runs roughshod over her employers. When *Hazel* debuted that September it was an instant ratings winner. The only problem was that no one seemed interested in fleshing out a part for my mother. The energy of every episode came from Shirley Booth butting heads with her boss, corporate attorney George Baxter, played by Don DeFore.

Meanwhile, Whitney's role—George's amiable wife, Dorothy Baxter, an interior designer whom Hazel called Missy B—stood on the fringes of every scene, relegated to silently smiling and nodding at Hazel and Mr. B's banter.

Whitney took her acting seriously enough that she never stopped trying to breathe some life into Dorothy, but from that first year, she hated everything about the series. She complained volubly and frequently that she hated being third banana on that show, hated the lack of variety, always arriving at the same set at the old Columbia/Gower Studios in Hollywood. She missed the excitement of appearing on different shows with new casts and going toe to toe with strong leading men like Clint Eastwood and Efrem Zimbalist Jr. She felt that Shirley Booth was always protecting her own territory, always making sure that no mother couldn't steal any of the spotlight. One perk for Whitney, though, was that initially her character was always fashionably dressed, wearing sexy, form-fitting suits.

During season two, Whitney began to feel as if even Missy B's chic wardrobe was being taken away from her. For the first year, the half-hour show was filmed in black and white but when it returned the following September as a color program, Dorothy's costume color palette had a new range, from drab gray to mousy beige. My mother told me she believed that Shirley had issued a mandate that she never wanted her to wear anything pretty or that might be construed as flattering. I can remember Whitney sitting at the makeup table in her room, putting on false eyelashes and cursing the lighting man, who she thought was cahoots with the star. Whitney was sure that Shirley was telling him how to light her so she looked jowly and unattractive.

Since Jack was her agent, Whitney blamed him for talking her into doing the series. She felt that he'd sold her out, that he'd imprisoned her in a multiyear contract with Screen Gems so that he could then use her regular stream of paychecks to buy into the Sid Gold-Jack Fields Agency, his boutique talent agency on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood. Even after it went off the air after a five-year run, she always referred to *Hazel* as "the graveyard" of her career. The only upside that *Hazel* had to offer was that with its high ratings and Shirley Booth's two consecutive Emmys, it brought industry cachet and regular money. In the span of a few years, mealtime for our little family had gone from modest macaroni and cheese dinners in South Pasadena to more elaborate white-tablecloth and candle-lit affairs in our Hollywood Hills dining room. Whitney even had a large ceramic bell that she'd ring—this still makes me wince to think about it—to summon our dear Guatemalan housekeeper, Anna.

Whitney and Jack really loved to entertain at home for their friends in the business. Ben Asner was a regular, as well as the casting director Lynn Stalmaster and his wife, Lee, and film director Arthur Hiller and his wife, Gwen. Marlon Brando came once; he and my older brother's *National Velvet* acting coach Frank Silvera became friends while making *Mutiny on the Bounty*.

Jack and Whitney seemed to prefer inviting people over when my brothers and I were out of the house, especially as the years passed and we got older. Having three teenage boys contradicted the young, glamorous TV star image Whitney was still putting out there. In fact, there are no home photos of my brothers and me from this time. There were never any family photos taken at the Whitley Terrace house. There are no photos of us with our mother until we were adults. It was a preventive measure: Not having snapshots of us around meant that there was nothing for a reporter to dig up about Whitney Blake and print in a magazine.

I can count on one hand the times my brothers and I were present at their parties. I have

faint memory of being about ten years old and being instructed how to offer cocktails on a tray to Martin Landau and Barbara Bain. I helpfully made sure I addressed Whitney by name in front of guests once in a while just to keep the “niece” possibility in the air. I never had to be reminded.

While filming *Hazel*, the only time my mother was around was on the weekend. Monday through Friday she'd leave for work at 5 a.m., before I woke up. She'd return home at night looking exhausted, retire to her bedroom, and I'd rarely see her. I was essentially being raised by housekeepers, trying to catch a glimpse of Whitney on the fly. Because I saw her so rarely, I didn't want to aggravate her by seeming to need her. Once, I really wanted her to sign a permission slip so I could see a movie they were showing to the girls in our grammar school class called *The Story of Menstruation*. I wasn't sure what it was about but since it was “for girls only,” I didn't want Jack to sign the slip. I didn't know anything about “the mysteries of womanhood” at the time, so I probably thought the movie was about a girl named Menstruation. I was inordinately excited to see it.

I think Whitney knew how clueless I was and her goal must have been to prepare me. So she came into my bedroom that night, sat down at the end of my bed, and gave me a short speech about cows and little calves, then said good night and went upstairs. I guess I understood it was somehow about our changing bodies but was not much more enlightened than before we spoke. I did get a profound sense of Whitney's discomfort around the subject. I am grateful to the Los Angeles Unified School District for making that film available or I would have been left totally confused about how I was to relate to the bovine population.

When I eventually got my first period, I was thirteen. I was with Whitney, Jack, and my brothers in Palm Springs for a few days, staying at a small rental house with a pool. I had just come in from swimming and saw the blood in my wet bathing suit. I had to go to Whitney with the news but I remember feeling shy; it was so personal a thing to tell her. I was not quite sure what I expected to happen but I begged her urgently to not tell Jack. Whitney said something about my needing pads and a belt and sent me off to get dressed. I went, asking again that she please not tell Jack.

“Oh, of course not,” she said.

An hour later, I saw Jack driving away.

“Where's he going?” I asked.

“To get your Kotex.”

What? Did she not care? Didn't it matter that I didn't want Jack to know? I just walked around and around in panicked circles, choking on feeling so betrayed.

Meanwhile, even before I hit puberty, I started getting very different signals from Jack. My stepfather was very appreciative of young, attractive women and would always comment on their appearance. From the time I was twelve, we'd play this game where I'd stand on the stair above him and I'd say, “Kiss me like the movie stars kiss,” and we'd mash our tight pursed mouths together and go “Mmmmmm ...” While it had been appealing to me when I was younger because it won me some attention, it was starting to get creepy as I got older. It wasn't until the time I could feel his tongue pushing forward against the inside of his lips that I didn't play the game anymore.

Then there was how I looked. I had these breasts. I went from almost flat-chested at thirteen to huge at fourteen. I felt it was because of them that I got so much undesired attention from men when I walked to junior high: whistles, guys yelling at me, some jacking off out their car window at me; I felt like a moving target and was always on the alert for *who's going after me today*. No wonder I have always leaned toward clothes that minimize my bust.

I had blossomed so unexpectedly that I didn't have a bra and wasn't sure how to go about getting one. Then I thought of the Lerner Shop on Hollywood Boulevard. I walked past it on my way to Le Conte. I stopped in one day after school and prowled around. God knows I wasn't going to ask for help. That would probably involve showing some saleswoman my breasts and, well, asking for help. I didn't want to do either, so I decided to figure it out myself. I grabbed a tape measure and leapt into a changing room, where I measured myself over my clothes. Going around my back and across the fullest part of my breast, I measured 40 inches. So that's a size 40, I figured, amazed that anyone would consider using a salesperson when this was as obvious as pie. I snagged a very white, starched, torpedo-shaped size 40 from the rack and tried it on. It was pretty scratchy and a bit big so I hiked the straps up really high to get it to fit me tightly, which put the back way up high across my shoulders. I wasn't clear just what was accomplished but I thought it was fabulous! I took it off, plunked down my bucks at the register, and sauntered out of the store. A bra owner.

When I got home, I was surprised to see my mother standing in the kitchen as I zipped past and headed straight downstairs to my room. She must have seen my parcel because she called out, "What did you buy?" I just yelled back, "A scarf."

I frankly can't recall where my clothes would come from. I only remember one shopping trip with my mother, which ended in disaster, probably typical of many mother-daughter shopping trips. She wanted me to wear something I didn't like and I ended up in tears. The dress came home with us anyway and I never wore it. Typical.

When I was about fifteen, I couldn't find swimwear that fit me properly, basically because my breasts were so full, and it was Jack who offered a solution. He could have a bathing suit custom-made for me. I could pick any fabric I wanted. He needed me to give him one of my bras for the tailor to copy. Giving my bra to my stepfather felt desperately creepy and everything in me recoiled. But I was a self-centered teenager and I wanted a nice swimsuit.

He brought it home a few weeks later when they had guests over to swim.

"Try it on," he said. "Let's see how it fits."

Well, he did get me this suit as a favor, I thought. I guess he can ask to see it on. I reluctantly went into my room, changed, and returned to show him. Jack had a way of looking at me that made me look away. I guess Jack liked how the bathing suit fit. His friends Lynn Stalmaster and Arthur Hiller were out by the pool.

"Go show them," he told me. "I'm sure they'd love to see it on you."

"Jack!" I protested.

"Go on, go on, go on," he insisted.

So I did as Jack asked. I walked slowly around the pool in my new custom bathing suit while his friends checked me out. They made complimentary noises. I hated doing this. I died a thousand deaths before going back into the house. But I was getting the message that my looks, my breasts had some power; that no matter how much shame I felt, how self-conscious

or insecure I might feel, how much I knew that the attention my breasts brought had nothing to do with *me*, they were my currency. That maybe they were all I had to have. And deep in my heart I craved the attention, no matter what.

2

Harvey was a client of Jack's, another houseguest who came to stay and lived with us for almost two years. In the late sixties, he'd make it big with his own TV series. But back then he was happy when Jack got him bit parts on shows. He had a beat-up James Dean quality and soulful, hooded eyes. He moved in when I was fourteen and he was an artistically wonderfully funny and moody twenty-one-year-old. How could I not fall in love with him?

I flirted with Harvey. I tried to get his attention by wearing a pair of cutoff jeans and an oversized button-up shirt knotted high so my bare midriff was exposed. I had pictures of my mother in a publicity photo dressed similarly and it seemed to work for her. I felt more silly than sexy, but I kept trying.

I felt he had to know that I coveted the nights he'd sit with my brothers and me and play bluesy records in front of the fireplace. Harvey would tell stories and we'd play memory games. He must have had no other place to go; why else would he spend evenings with a bunch of teenagers? But then he gave me his sweater. To keep! A gray pullover with patched elbows. I loved it; it smelled of him and I wore it everywhere. Then he started dating the very delicate young woman. They'd frequently have dinner at our house with Whitney and Jack and I'd be so jealous. One night, I was going out and stopped in the dining room to say good-bye. As I walked out, I heard Harvey's date say, "Isn't she wearing the sweater I gave you?" I'd no idea it had been a gift from her. I was so confused. She gave him the sweater because he gave it to me, so he must care about me, but he was spending lots of time with her. And then, they were married at our house about a year later. I was crushed.

It was probably around this time I started putting more energy into getting boys' attention. I was desperate for attention but my shyness retarded the process. When I was in ninth grade I had started attending youth group activities at a local Presbyterian church, where I'm sure I met some girls, but they were really only vehicles to the boys. There were about twenty of us in the youth group and we would have dances and serve dinners to the elderly members at Wednesday-night church gatherings, then we'd pair up and go make out down in the church basement. I was out on a date one night with a guy from the group named John and we wound up necking heavily in his car behind a drive-in. If I recall, small articles of clothes had been removed when suddenly flashlights were blinding us through the windshield and we were ordered out of the car by Los Angeles's finest. They talked to us separately, I think to ascertain that I was there willingly, because John was older and although I was fourteen, I looked younger. They threatened to call my parents but didn't, thank God; we were let go and I went home pretty rattled and embarrassed.

Shortly after that, someone must have read my diary—I'm not sure if it was Whitney or my father—and thought that I devoted too many pages to the opposite sex, so, much to my dismay, it was decided that I would go live with my father about fifteen miles away in the San Fernando Valley. Right around this period my brother Brian fell in love with the theater department at Hollywood High and began sneaking out in the early evening to go down the hill to school to rehearse. I don't know what Jack's aversion was to this activity but somehow

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