
My Dossier

My first memories begin at the age of three. I was the seventh of eight children, one more competitive than the other. My position in the family was solid. I was the monkey grinder's monkey. I could and did perform at the drop of a hat. Every time we had company, I would crawl out from my hiding place under the piano, climb atop the piano bench, and sing, accompanying myself with adorable Shirley Temple-like gestures, first the right hand, then the left hand.

This is pinky

This is pinky

How are you?

How are you?

Very well, I thank you

Very well, I thank you

Run away

Run away

I continued that song through ring man, middle man, pointer, and thumb man.

Aunt Lily whispered to my mother, "Anna! She is the next Shirley Temple."

It was a magical time. There were no hugs or kisses in my family, but being noticed and praised over my sisters and brothers felt like a hundred hugs and kisses.

My mother was very Victorian. Anna did not spare the rod. Going against her will brought a hard cheek pinch or a comb through my mop of curly hair, which left me with a present-day horror of going to a beauty salon:

“On pain of death, do not pull my hair.”

She also stoked the flames of competitive jealousy among the siblings.

“At your age, your sister was already doing cartwheels.”

How could I not want to kill the competition? Particularly my younger sister, Arlene, whose life began with my enmity. I took every opportunity to give her a punch, a kick, or, my favorite, a tiny bite. She gave back as good as she got.

My mother was judge and jury, anointed by divine proclamation. Like Charlton Heston atop Mount Sinai, my father dutifully proclaimed my mother’s commandments. He had the voice and physique to pull it off. He was a handsome man who stood six feet tall and possessed of a thunderous basso voice. The family trembled when he used it.

From an early age, I knew that *the princes*, aka the four boys, were the preferred sex in the household, right down to their extra portions at the dinner table. Whatever talents my four brothers possessed were enthusiastically supported throughout high school and college: piano lessons, violin lessons, chemistry laboratory workshops, and model airplane workshops.

Before the Depression, no expense was spared. After the Depression, the family made do with second-hand clothes, tools, and tutus. I grew up in two families.

The first five, in order of age, Raymond, Allyn, Marilyn, Elliot, and Lucille, were born *before* the Depression. The last three, David, Sally-Jane, and Arlene, were born *after*.

The Depression took a big bite out of the family budget. My parents sacrificed to provide the best teachers and classes for their eight talented children. It was easy in New York City, which was a mecca for

great teachers and free scholarship programs and special schools, many of which, in my early years, I was a beneficiary.

Boys had a fast-track ticket to a better education and continued support of their pursuits. Why? They never got pregnant. It took me years to realize that as soon as one of my sisters or I began to menstruate, our lives were redirected. Like rejected virgins from the local Vestal Temple, my mother prepared us for the marriage market. Dance, art, and music lessons were continued only to attract a husband. The more cultured and sophisticated we were, the more likely we would attract a higher-quality prospect.

My mother's form of birth control was to preach the horrors and evils of sex. She proclaimed that the sex act was the most disgusting part of being married. Narrating horror stories about how she suffered having to "do it" traumatized me. And yet... something didn't add up. My father was only the nominal head of our household. My mother was the real power. She had twelve pregnancies and eight children. That's a lot of suffering. Why didn't she just say, "*no*"? There was no way I would even think about asking her that question. Unless I wanted a mouth full of soap.

At 13, I got my period and prayed to God to take it back. My mother's terrifying admonitions fell on uneducated ears. I didn't know any of my body parts, where they were, what they did. I didn't understand how a girl got pregnant.

From a hug?

Maybe playing Post Office?

If there had been any other way to escape, I never would have married. But I was a coward. I lacked the courage to confront or rebel against my parents. I was Freud's paralyzed, hysterical girl.

If you don't believe me, ask any of the men in my life.

That might be difficult.

Most of them are dead.