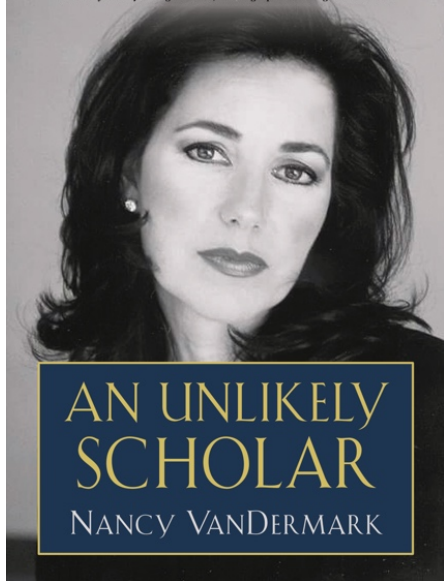


AN UNLIKELY SCHOLAR is a terrifying, funny, and triumphant roller coaster ride - from an assembly line to Madison Avenue, from a limo and couture wardrobe, to waiting on tables, and 27 years after high school, waking up in a college dorm room.



*An Unlikely Scholar is a terrifying, funny, and triumphant roller coaster ride - from an assembly line to Madison Avenue, from a limo and couture wardrobe, to waiting on tables, and 27 years after high school, waking up in a college dorm room.*

## **An Unlikely Scholar** by Nancy VanDermark

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A black and white portrait of Nancy Vandermark, the author. She has dark, wavy hair and is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. She is wearing a dark top and a small pearl earring.

# AN UNLIKELY SCHOLAR

NANCY VANDERMARK

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## Chapter One

*“Without leaps of imagination or dreaming,  
we lose the excitement of possibilities.  
Dreaming, after all, is a form of planning.”*  
-Gloria Steinem

January 1988

I boarded the 7:20 a.m. Trailways bus in Wilkes-Barre bound for Port Authority. It was a typical January morning in northeastern Pennsylvania, cold and damp with a monochromatic gray sky that merged into the pavement on Interstate 80. This was a well-planned semi-annual shopping trip, and I settled back into my seat to consider a strategy that would maximize time and money. I wore a navy blue Christian Dior military style coat and a one-carat pear-shaped cubic zirconia ring. Tucked inside my faux Fendi purse was a \$100 bill and a Diner's Club credit card.

Arriving at Saks Fifth Avenue shortly after 10:00 a.m., I walked back to the Estée Lauder counter on a mission to bring home a new fragrance and something from the Spring makeup collection. As I approached the counter, I saw a well-dressed woman in a full-length mink coat speaking with a sales associate. “Is there something else I can show you today, Mrs. Lauder?” the associate inquired politely. I could hardly believe my eyes – it was Estée Lauder herself!

The queen of cosmetics was tall, with perfectly coiffed dark blonde hair. At nearly eighty years old she was still a striking woman. As she turned to walk away, I impulsively spoke up. “Mrs. Lauder, I just want to tell you that I think Paulina Poriskova is the most phenomenal spokeswoman you have ever hired!”

Paulina Porizkova is a Czech super-model who became the face of Estée Lauder in 1988, winning an unheard of \$6,000,000 contract. Her ads

were sensual, a dramatic departure from the company's traditionally demure town and country style images.

Mrs. Lauder's reply altered the trajectory of my life. "Well, thank you. You're quite lovely yourself."

The bus ride home gave me time to reflect on dreams that had died; some killed, others buried alive. I was unprepared for the power of a dream that sought to be resurrected by its own force.

*Estée Lauder said that I was lovely*; I hadn't felt lovely. In fact, I had begun acquiring symbols of perceived affluence – the designer coat, fake accessories and more than the usual amount of makeup to cover my insecurities. I was the only person in my husband's immediate and extended family without a college education. This wasn't the first time that I had used glamour as an effective and deliberate disguise, and it wouldn't be the last.

September 1972

I began my senior year of high school at sixteen while working part-time for the same party favor factory in Pittston, Pennsylvania that had employed me for the past two years. Throughout the summer, I worked full-time on the assembly line, from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. My job was gluing tops on party horns. I had to test one every hundred or so. The job had allowed me to save enough money to attend the Marilyn Gauntlett Modeling and Finishing School in Wilkes-Barre. The nine month certificate course curriculum included walking, speaking, modeling and etiquette, and promised employment to qualified graduates. For years, I had studied *Glamour* and *Cosmopolitan* magazines religiously, carefully crafting a personality cultivated by Helen Gurley Brown and Gloria Steinem.

Helen Gurley Brown, the iconic editor of *Cosmo*, had turned the publication into a self-help guide for working girls. She gave advice on everything from makeup and money to how to please a man. Gloria

Steinem, after graduating from Smith College in 1956, became a journalist writing essays for *Glamour* and *New York* magazine. She eventually became a co-founder of *Ms.* magazine. I imagined these women as powerful older sisters and regularly consulted their articles and essays for advice.

In the 1960's, best-selling fashion magazines featured a section on vocational training schools and junior colleges. There were ads for airline and secretarial schools as well as short courses in modeling and fashion related careers. An ad on a matchbook cover read, "Be a Model or Just Look Like One." I dreamed that one day I would find an exciting job and leave the northeastern Pennsylvania coal region.

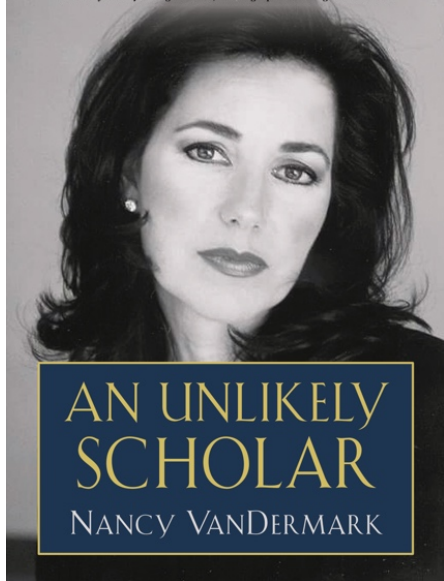
At sixteen, my fashion sense left much to be desired, but the instructors at the Gauntlett School provided excellent guidance and I was an eager student. As a college prep "C" student with straight A's in geometry, Spanish and typing, my after-school hours were spent on factory work and modeling school. After scoring 980 on the SAT, the guidance counselor at Wyoming Area High School called me into her office and questioned why I had not yet applied to any colleges.

"Dr. Wiley," I replied determinedly, "I just don't want to be poor anymore. I'm going to work full-time as a secretary."

I was an 80 word-per-minute typist with a reasonably respectable I.Q. and I already had plans. A clerical job would function as my stepping stone to a well-paid position as an executive secretary.

There had been no discussion of student loans with the guidance counselor, nor were there any conversations at home about my attending college.

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