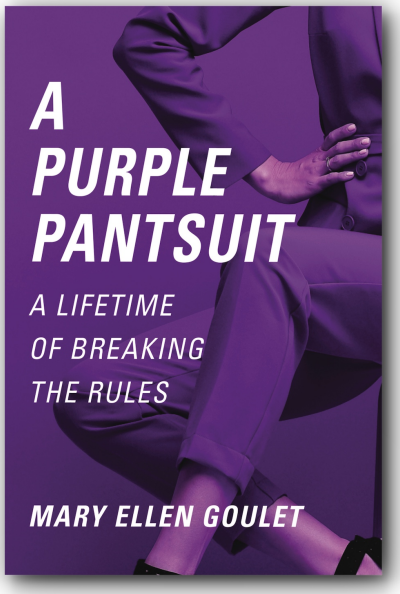
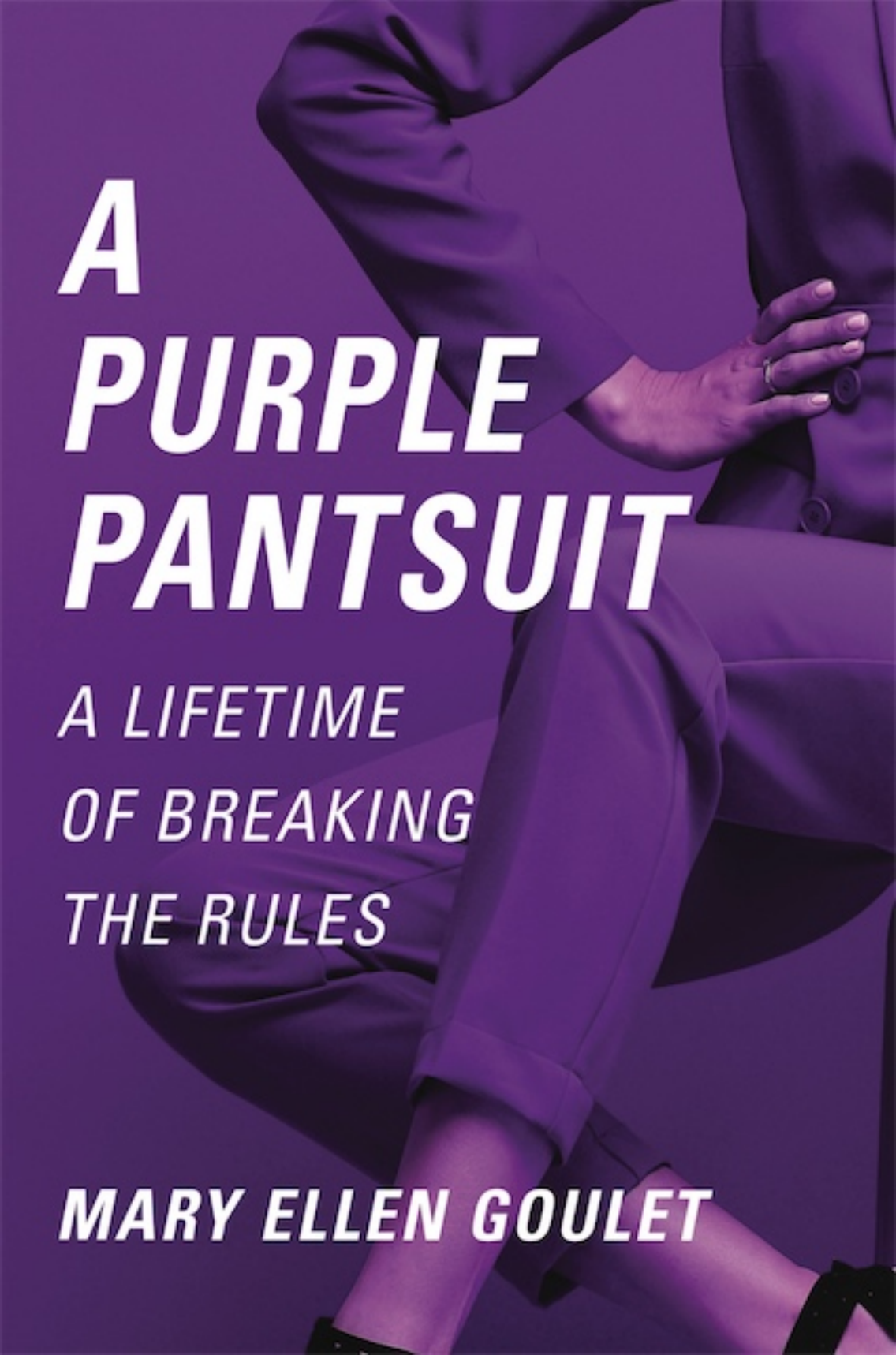


The story of a woman who stands up to the status quo, making drastic changes during her lifetime. During her journey, influenced by her unusual upbringing and the women's movement of the 60's and 70's, she affects the lives of many who touch a part of her life.

A PURPLE PANTSUIT

A LIFETIME OF BREAKING THE RULES

by Mary Ellen Goulet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MARY ELLEN GOULET

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CHAPTER 1
ROOTS RUNNING DEEP

I was the youngest of four children, born in Ely, Minnesota, in 1932, during the worst of the Great Depression. At that time Ely was a bustling, grimy mining town. It is located in the northeastern part of the state, a few miles from the Canadian border, with lengthy drives to the largest cities of Duluth and Minneapolis. During my childhood it was populated by hardworking immigrants from Europe, mostly from Finland and Yugoslavia, who were seeking jobs in the underground iron mines.

Ely was remote, not only by location but also culturally. I grew up in this all-white, Christian community of six thousand people. There were no Jews, blacks, or other minorities working in the mines. I didn't even know what a synagogue or a lesbian was. Our family lived a mile from town in a group of twelve houses known as Calumet Location and built by the mining company. It was surrounded by a vast forest with Lake Shagawa a block away. Our playgrounds were the woods and the lake.

Because of my arrival at such an inopportune time (during the Depression), and six, eight, and nine years younger than my siblings, I always thought I was an accident. Years later, when I was having a private talk with my mother, I asked her about this. She told me, "Yes,

you were a surprise but we were delighted to learn that you were coming, and when your father first heard the news he said, 'This baby is going to be a boy and we will name him Jerry.'" Nine months later my father, accepting the ways of God, said, "Well, we didn't get a boy but I'll raise her as a tomboy." And he did, and I was.

Dad moved to Ely when he was eighteen, joining his two older brothers already working in the underground iron mines. The copper mines in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan had played out, so the three Goulet bothers followed the jobs to northeastern Minnesota. A few years later Dad's brothers moved away from Ely, but my father stayed because after six years he'd found his true love with Emma, a sweet, pretty seventeen-year-old girl he courted on his Indian motorcycle. This shy, dark-haired, petite girl was instantly impressed by the tall, well-built, blue-eyed, English-speaking charmer. For the first time in her life she felt safe with someone. She knew this handsome man would protect her.

The Catholic faith grew deep roots in my father's family, including, as I was often told, four great-aunts who were nuns in Canada, one of whom was a mother superior. The first thing my father did after proposing to my mother was to call his mother in Michigan to give her the news. Her immediate response was, "Is she a good Catholic?"

I remember what my father told me he said to his mother. "Well, she's baptized Catholic but her family's been lax so she's a so-so

Catholic. But, Mom, I'll help her become a good one." In the following years my mother, who had no former spiritual direction, turned herself into a devout Catholic, while raising us four kids as strict Catholics.

My brothers, sister, and I followed the guidance of our parents. Saturday afternoons were set aside for confessions. On Sunday mornings and holy days we went to Mass. We said grace together before meals, and every night we knelt by our beds to ask God's blessings. Our small town had no Catholic school, but we never missed the once-a-week after-school religious instructions at the church taught by the Benedictine missionary sisters from Duluth.

We observed the seasons of Advent and Lent. Lent was the time of penance. We went to the Stations of the Cross on Friday afternoons, and each of us gave up something special to us during those weeks, as well as all gum and candy. The weeks of Lent dragged on. I missed my favorite radio shows and Saturday afternoon movies. Music was banned. The weather was usually gloomy, matching my mood. My only refuge was burying myself in my books.

Then, at long last, Easter Sunday arrived! It was such a treat to get our Easter baskets full of sweets we'd given up for so long. We dressed for Mass in new outfits, including Easter bonnets. When the weather was too cold or snowy for spring clothes, we still wore them, although they were covered by our winter coats. After Mass we hunted for Easter eggs that Dad had hidden both in and out of the

house. Mom had prepared her memorable Easter Sunday dinner, complete with a fancy dessert. The long, dreary days of Lent were forgotten. I felt we had paid our dues.

The season of Advent had a totally different feel than that of Lent. We were preparing for the birth of Jesus, rather than his death. Anticipation, excitement, filled our home as we searched the woods for a perfect tree, carefully unwrapped fragile decorations, and untangled tree lights while we savored the aroma of Christmas cookies and Mom's delicious poticas, an essential tradition in my mother's family. Yugoslavian immigrants brought the recipe with them when they came to the United States. The women rolled the pastry dough paper thin, filling them with butter and apples or walnuts. Because they were difficult to make, poticas were usually served only at Easter, Christmas, weddings, and funerals.

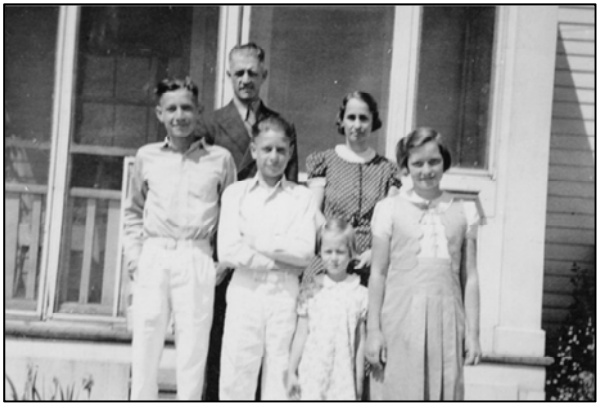
At the beginning of Advent, four weeks before Christmas, we took turns before dinner lighting one of the four candles in the Advent wreath. Each week we added another candle until all four were burning on the final week before Christmas. That first week of Advent my mother would unwrap the creche, arranging the figures in the middle of the mantel, without the Christ child. The three Magi were placed at the edge. Every day we'd take turns inching the Magi closer to the manger. On Christmas Eve one of our parents would place the baby Jesus in the cradle before we went to midnight Mass, where our popular, adult choir sang familiar Christmas carols. They sounded like

angels, filling the church and me with the joy of the season. A week later the Magi would arrive at the manger.

In our family the Catholic faith was central to our lives. We followed the rules, obeyed the commandments, and, if we doubted, were admonished to believe and keep the faith.

A Goulet family outing in 1935 (left to right: David, Emma, Placid ("Nooks"), Mary Ellen, Raoul, Patricia

Mary Ellen (always in jeans) with buddy Dicky in 1936



The Goulet family in 1937

CHAPTER 2
LEARNING SELF-RELIANCE

Dad, as he pledged when I was born, raised me as a tomboy, teaching me self-reliance. I was an agile, skinny, tow-haired youngster, constantly on the go. Until I was about thirteen, I used to tag after him when he went to town, making his rounds of the post office, barbershop, garage, or paying bills. At some of his stops he talked about what was happening in the world, exchanging views with others. I was his constant shadow around home, tending his rabbits, cow, and any outside chores. We went fishing in the big, clumsy rowboat on nearby Lake Shagawa in the summer and stood shivering together over the ice fish hole in the winter.

When I was about ten years old, I went hunting with him one time. It was only once because just as he was about to shoot a large buck, I knocked his arm down, shouting, “Don’t shoot! He might be Bambi!” For a moment Dad was furious, but I never forgot what he said to me. “You’re right. We don’t need to shoot any more deer. They are beautiful creatures and I always hated killing them. I’m working full-time and can afford meat from the market. Let’s go home.” I realized then that my father listened to me and was willing to change his mind when he thought I was right. The Depression was over. Dad never went hunting again.

During our treks through the woods my father taught me the names of the different kinds of trees. I learned how to identify the tracks and dung of deer, rabbits, black bears, and wolves. He never feared the wildlife but respected all of nature. He taught me to stand my ground when facing predators. I learned that the black bears we had in northeastern Minnesota were not as dangerous as the grizzlies. But I was warned to be careful. When you live in the middle of the woods you need to learn how to survive.

Dad's lessons remain with me today. "Never run. Don't panic. Always make a loud noise when you see a dangerous animal," he advised. "Bears usually defend their young, but I've seen a bear run away from her babies if I made enough noise. Be very careful of the bears that have been tamed. They don't fear humans. I've never known a wolf to attack a human. I heard that they will not eat the body of a dead man they find on a trail. The only creature that ever attacked me was a squirrel when I accidentally stepped on her nest."

During the berry-scarce years the bears would come searching for food in our garbage can. Dad would lean out the back door, yelling and banging on some pans. The bears would run back into the forest. One day when I was walking alone in the woods, I surprised a bear eating berries. I yelled loudly, flailing my arms. The bear disappeared. Dad had given me good advice. The wolves were elusive. During all my years living in the north woods I never came into contact with them. I only knew they were around by their tracks.

When Dad was at work I played outside. There were only two kids in our location who were close to my age, Lois and Dickey. Most often I played with Dickey. We wore overalls that were ideal for moving toy trucks in the dirt; catching tadpoles, turtles, salamanders, or fireflies; biking gravel roads; floating paper boats down the streams after a rain; climbing trees; or building forts in the woods. In the winter we exchanged overalls for snow pants, building forts in the deep snow, sledding, making snow angels, or throwing snowballs, until we began to grow icicles on our runny noses and wet mittens.

My oldest brother, Roy, often reminded me that our family was largely untouched by the Great Depression. Unlike many others we always had food on the table and parents who loved us and each other. We never heard them argue. We grew up in calm surroundings, disciplined, never abused, with high expectations for our futures. My husband, Bob, has said more than once, "Honey, you're the only one I know who grew up in a Beaver Cleaver childhood." And in a way, it was. My two older brothers did the difficult chores such as chopping wood, putting up hay, milking the cow, or delivering papers or milk to the neighborhood. My sister was learning about housecleaning and cooking from our mom while I was hanging out at the nearby machine shops where welders and mechanics did repair work for the iron mines, trailing after my dad, playing outside, or, in harsh weather, curling up on my bed reading books or comics. I guess today I understand why my brother used to complain that I was spoiled.

My friends never said I was spoiled. They thought I was too bossy. In looking back, I think they were right. They sometimes got in trouble when I talked them into following my offbeat ideas.

There was a shortcut to town that was above some of the mining tunnels that crossed beneath that area. Because a few of the unused tunnels were collapsing, sink holes were appearing on the surface. We had been told to stay out, and signs by the path warned us of the danger. My tomboy ways had made me pushy and a risk taker. I hated the STAY OUT sign. I wanted to explore the forbidden place. It looked so tempting. I couldn't see any sink holes. Maybe the mining company was lying to us.

One day my curiosity got the best of me. Lois and I were wandering by the fence. I wanted to cross over. But an adventure like this was calling for someone to share it. It was always more fun to talk it over with a friend long after the deed was accomplished, so I persuaded Lois to join me. "Come on, Lois. Don't be a baby. Be careful to watch out for the holes," I warned as we crawled over the rickety fence.

Lois, timid and cautious, had hesitated for a while, but then decided to follow me for an adventure into the unknown. Grasshoppers flew out at us as we wandered around. The tall grasses rustled under us in the hot August heat. They had grown tall, covering any signs of sink holes. I was in the lead when I saw a lizard lying motionless in the grass. "Lois, take a look at this."

Lois didn't answer. I turned around. Where was Lois? She had disappeared. Even though she was older than me, she was a lot shorter so I knew I had to look closely through the overgrown vegetation. I called loudly and heard a muffled shout. I ran to the sound. I looked down and there she was looking up at me from the bottom of a sink hole, tears streaming down her chubby cheeks. I knew then and there that the mining company was not lying. Sink holes were deep for little kids.

I shouted, "Lois, are you okay? Can you climb out?" She was too upset to try to escape and I couldn't reach her. "Don't worry. I'll get help."

I ran to her house to get her father. He ran with me to the hole and pulled her out. He comforted her, but scolded me. Boy, was he mad! He was a protective parent with his only child, unlike my father who allowed me more freedom than most parents. I spent most of the days outside. My parents called me in for supper. The other kids were more restricted. They had to check in more often, so I was often left alone to run free in the woods or visit the mechanics or other workers hired by the mining company.

Lake Shagawa was a block away from our house in Calumet Location. It had a narrow point of land jutting into the lake named Sandy Point. We felt like we owned it. We fished from the rocky shores, walked the sandy beaches, and overturned rocks to pull out the detested bloodsuckers. We piled them on the hot sand, watching them

squirm as we poured salt on them. We hated the slimy things that stuck to us when we were swimming. They were the only critters that we killed. Mostly we swam away the hot days of summer.

One lazy summer day Lois and I were alone at Sandy Point beach. We were about eleven at the time. The older kids had left for the military so we had the beach to ourselves. We were sitting on the dock, both bored with summer vacation and looking forward to the start of school. I looked out at the islands in the distance. "Lois, I bet we could swim to the closest island. It can't be more than a mile from shore. We're both good swimmers. What do you say?"

Lois agreed that it would be fun to share this adventure with our classmates next week. We were wearing our swimsuits, left our clothes on the beach, walked the first few shallow blocks, then swam leisurely the rest of the way. It seemed easy enough, but by the time we got to the island we were too exhausted to swim back. Fortunately, a passing boat came to our rescue and dropped us off at the nearest shore. From there it was only a few blocks' walk back to the beach at Sandy Point. We were exhausted but bragged to each other the whole way. We had something to boast about when we got back to school.

The ending was not as glorious. Lois's father was on the scene with our clothes he'd found on the beach. He thought we had drowned. Talk about upset! I felt sorry for my friend but I never got a scolding about this from my dad that I can remember. I felt enormous pride in the accomplishment.

I never forgot my first day in kindergarten. It was the distressing day when I first realized I was not like the other girls who had been brought up to be obedient, to be seen but not heard, and to follow the appropriate role models for females of that era.

It began with an argument with my mother. I wanted to wear my overalls. She insisted I wear a dress like I wore to church on Sundays. I grumbled and fussed but finally gave in. After an intimidating ride on a big yellow school bus, filled with chattering friends who knew each other, it only got worse. My two neighborhood friends were both in first grade and went off with their school friends. I was alone. I walked into the large, colorful room, supplied with paper, crayons, scissors, clay, charts, pictures, and toys. We sat in a circle on the floor and listened to the teacher tell stories and sing songs.

Then the teacher announced play time. The dolls, dishes, furniture, and walk-in dollhouse were in one corner of the room. All the girls ran over to the dollhouse, grabbing dolls and fussing with different clothes. The boys rushed to the other side filled with trucks, blocks, and a sandbox with pails and shovels. I stood awkwardly, my stomach churning, my head aching. After a moment I headed toward the boys' play corner. The teacher took me by the shoulders and gently but firmly led me over to the dollhouse. I felt flustered and out of place. I was uncomfortable playing with dolls. I knew I didn't fit in. I copied the girls but still felt like an oddball. I was grateful when

school was over and for the weekends when I could wear overalls and play whatever I wanted.

First grade was a thousand times better. There were no separate play areas for boys and girls. We played on the playground with swings, slides, monkey bars, and cement for hopscotch games. We were introduced to Dick, Jane, Sally, Spot, and Puff. I fell in love with reading and excelled, most likely because we spoke only English in our home, unlike many of my classmates whose families spoke little English.

Although our family went through the Great Depression, we were fortunate in many ways. We lived in affordable housing provided by the mining company. Because my father was a foreman, he worked a day a week making safety inspections in the closed mine. That did not bring enough money to pay all of the bills so I saw him as a model of hard work and entrepreneurship, using the surrounding forest and lake to supply us with food.

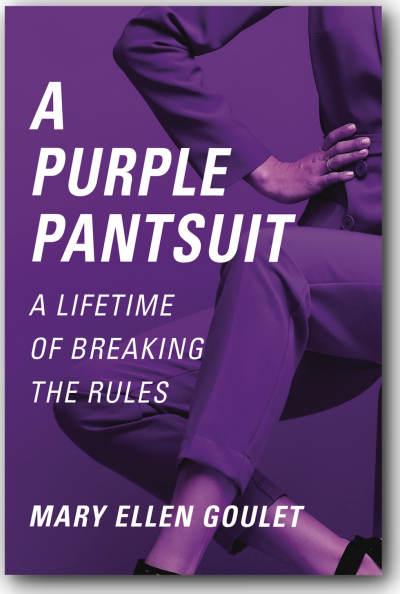
During the Depression he'd go hunting in the woods, providing game for our table. He fished in the summer, netted in the fall, and ice fished in the winter. He turned the garage into a barn for the cow and bred rabbits for food. We had fresh fish on our table during all the seasons, along with vegetables from our huge garden that my mother preserved by canning or pickling enough to last through the year.

My father always looked for other opportunities to feed his growing family. He made a deal with his boss, Captain Charley, to

borrow some unused land next to our location that was owned by the mining company to use for a pasture for a cow. The captain said he could have it free of charge. Dad agreed to fence it in at his own expense.

Dad was an avid reader and aware of current events, so I never knew if it was pure luck or if he had an inkling as to the future, but he withdrew the family savings from the bank shortly before the crash of 1929. He purchased his first cow, Marie, a Guernsey cow, followed by Cornett and Lady, both rich milk producers. During the next ten years our family enjoyed daily milk, butter, and delicious ice cream. Being the youngest I only remember Lady, the last of our Guernseys. I heard from my brothers that Marie and Cornett were so tame they could sleep on the cows' stomachs while they were lying down chewing their cuds.

Lady wasn't as tame. She was a bit wild. By now I was old enough to help Dad with the chores. He trusted me to bring Lady home from the pasture each night for her milking. I was determined to show him that I could do the job. I wanted to prove myself. Unfortunately, that ornery cow insisted on trotting home, faster and faster. I could barely hang on to the halter. I hoped no one would see me. I was so embarrassed. By the time we got back to the barn she was the one bringing me home.



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