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ANSWERING THE SIREN'S CALL

By Mark Di Frangia

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Answering the Siren's Call



Mark di Frangia

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About the Author

Born and educated in Northern California, Mark studied at a community college before leaving the United States for Greece. Years later, he resumed his education at New York University.

In this the author's republished first work, he relates tales of growing up a closeted gay in suburban America, while longing from a young age to experience life in exotic foreign cultures. Fate eventually takes him to Greece where he learns the local sexual mores, traditions and customs, and makes lasting new friendships. After a long aviation career in Greece, the Persian Gulf and New York, the author shifted professional direction to work as a major-domo in Europe. His second book, *The Naked Butler*, relates some of his experiences with a whodunnit storyline.

Through his appearances in German media, Mark has gained a degree of notoriety as everyone's ideal butler. He has now closed this circle and retired to Athens, where Fate has brought a loving, caring and beautiful partner into his life.

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Gil in the Navy, at 18

Chapter 1:

Gilbert's story

Dad was born in a rambling, three-storey Queen Anne-style house at 1815 San Antonio Avenue in Alameda, California. His grandparents, Shelby and Gertrude Brooks, had bought the house after marrying in 1888, when Alameda was only sparsely populated with homes separated by great expanses of orchards and fields. A first family album testifies to this rural state of affairs with photographs of the towering clapboard house from various angles and very little urban scenery visible in any direction in the background. Among Dad's grandfather's hobbies was a passion and talent for photography, often catching his subjects in unusually tender poses. By all reports, Shelby Brooks was a sweet-natured and just husband, and an adoring father. This is apparent in the many photos he took for posterity.

Dad's mother, Marjorie, had also been born in that house, in July of 1895, the last of three children and the only girl. Her father began the documentation of family life by capturing his wife and children in a variety of settings. In some of these, the children were dressed in Louis XVI court dress, including powdered wigs and lascivious beauty spots. What the occasion for the masquerade was, is not mentioned in the carefully penned captions in white ink. Yet, such care was taken with the development and hand-coloring of these photographs that these childhood albums have survived a century of storage with hardly a trace of fading.

Being hardy outdoorsmen and women, the Brooks' family participated in frequent reunions. They picnicked in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park and hiked the slopes of Mt. Tamalpais. There are further photos of a visit to Old Man Snow, Gertrude's father, at his

well-hidden cottage in Muir Valley. Both sets of Marjorie's grandparents came from large families who had moved to California from the Midwest and East Coast in the early 1850s. Though none pursued farming out West, several California-born offspring took a deep interest in botany and forestry. This rosy image of well-being carries through into consecutive albums, indicating comfortable prosperity and a zest for life. A Japanese houseboy assumed the running of the household, freeing Gertrude to pursue painting, wood carving and music. Many photographs show her working at an easel or teaching Marjorie to play the piano. This affluent and protected lifestyle was to change drastically in 1906.

The Brooks family had devoted two generations to building up a lucrative insurance business, only to face bankruptcy when the disastrous earthquake struck the San Francisco Bay Area on the morning of April 16, 1906. The family business had thrived reinsuring claims made by smaller, independent companies. However, the immense devastation incurred by the earthquake and the ensuing fires were ruinous to all insurers involved on any scale. There was no insurance against earthquake damage then, but there was against fire. In a concerted effort to compensate the ceaseless stream of incoming claims, Shelby Brooks literally worked himself into an early grave, and his family into poverty. He died at the age of 47, some say from a stress-related heart attack though others later claimed it was suicide.

Marjorie's older brothers, Leland and Heywood, had gone back east to study and work at engineering and the stock exchange, respectively. The dire financial shambles their father had left behind drove his exasperated widow to the point of despair. For what it was worth, Gertrude sold the business and paid off debts through the sale of choice parcels of real estate in Alameda County. Her father, Harvey Snow, had earmarked these as safe investments with growth potential. Sadly, others prospered from his long-sightedness.

By now, Alameda had become a so-called bedroom community of San Francisco. The advent of ferry service from Oakland and Alameda across the bay to San Francisco further stimulated a building boom in suburban areas where real estate prices were beginning to climb sharply in value. All that was left to the Brooks family was its home and furnishings when the United States joined in WWI in distant Europe. Marjorie's brothers signed up and served in the US Army in France.

In June of 1923 Marjorie married a consummate rake, my grandfather. Russell Earle Harris had one broken marriage and a child behind him. He also had an overabundance of Southern charm and gentility. By profession he was a salesman---with all the connotations that profession carries with it. Thanks to his dapper, well-groomed appearance and fluid charm, he had landed a job with the Pet Milk Company in San Francisco. The enterprise struck on China as a new, untapped market of millions. They sent Russell to Shanghai to sell the Chinese a recent invention---condensed milk.

Not long after their honeymoon at Yosemite, Marjorie was seeing her new husband off to the distant East---due West across the wide Pacific---from a San Francisco pier. A photograph of this scene, showing the couple hugging close and smiling for the camera, is on my desk. When their first child, Doreen, came along in 1924, Russell was too far from home to pass out congratulatory cigars to family members. However Marjorie followed in her father's footsteps by documenting family life with a Brownie camera. Russell came back to the States on yearly leave, bringing presents and select pieces of Chinese household furnishings. Slowly but surely, the musty Victorian antiques decorating the parlor at the San Antonio Avenue home were replaced with tasteful objects of Art Déco and chinoiserie. A second child was stillborn in 1925; a concerted effort a year later produced my father in April of 1927.

This unusual love marriage brought a good deal of material comfort and happiness to Marjorie's life, even if her husband was largely absent from the scene. Her eldest brother, Leland, had returned to California after serving in WWI to work for Shell Oil in Oakland. Heywood Brooks was rolling in money in Manhattan, dating a Ziegfeld Follies showgirl and leading the charmed life of a successful Wall Street broker. When the crash of 1929 came along it was followed by an investigation into Heywood's business practices. A forerunner of the SEC found Heywood guilty of illegal dealings and sentenced him to a prison term.

Leland, now married with two daughters, had a modicum of financial security through his position as chief engineer at Shell Oil. As they were then living in the basement flat at home, they made it through the Depression years unscathed. Heywood, on the contrary, once released from prison, turned to drink instead of some more rapid form of suicide. Having already married his Ziegfeld Follies showgirl while on a pre-Crash roll, he was now saddled with an expensive wife used to the best of everything but with no domestic skills.

Russell and Pet Milk survived the Crash of 1929 and stayed together until the late 1930s when Japan invaded China. As a couple Marjorie and Russell were less lucky. Russell was granted more frequent home leave to spend States-side but each prolonged visit led to clashes. Perhaps without originally wishing for it, Marjorie had fallen into the role of being a successful single mother who relished her independence. In the photo albums she had started for Doreen and Gilbert, Russell appears only sporadically with the children, clenching a cigar in his pearly teeth and flirting with the camera.

The Great Depression was in full swing when Marjorie filed for divorce in 1935. Russell had to be notified through his company, but he didn't contest the action in faraway Shanghai. What kind of life

he was leading in Shanghai's ex-pat community in the dashing 1930s is open to much speculation. In any case, divorce spelled out no urgent need for him to return to the United States and take an active interest in his children. He initially remitted child support payments only to gradually forget this obligation as time and distance further severed his involvement.

There was no welfare system in the 1930s. Marjorie had no alternative but to go to work, or, more correctly stated, join the ranks of men and women seeking work of any kind. Music had always played an important role in Marjorie's life and came to rescue her in this hour of need. She landed a job at Sherman-Clay's in Oakland playing sheet music for prospective buyers on an impressive grand piano. Her repertoire ranged from popular to classical hits. Her good looks and outgoing nature were an additional boon to sales which led to discreet romances with Al Jolson and other artists when they were performing in San Francisco. Over time, Marjorie established a budding public relations network by maintaining contact with many vocalists and musicians and selling their autographed signature hits. With certain visiting artists there were tales of ongoing romantic trysts.

Gertrude Brooks filled her days with painting, carving redwood porch furniture and minding the Gil and Doreen when they got back from school. She had long been a member of Alameda's Adelpian Society, was well connected with other local artists and able to supplement the small family income with sales from her various works. These contacts also opened up new fields of interest for Gertrude. Religious curiosity led her into the realm of Rosicrucianism; she even had a hand for the Tarot cards. Dad remembers her prognostications to this day. He was exposed to a good many eccentric but harmless friends of Gertrude's while practicing piano after school. These were the happiest years of his childhood.

It wasn't long before Heywood, now penniless, moved back to the family home in Alameda with his floozy bride in tow. He took whatever work he could find while slowly drink himself to death on cheap gin. Though his sober cheerful presence was a boon to Gil and Doreen longing for an attentive father-figure, it also meant two more mouths to feed from a limited income. As the Depression dragged on Gil took up a paper route while Doreen did babysitting for the few fortunate families where both parents had work. Dad's later stories of the Depression era were colorful and seemed incredible in the economic boom years of the late 1950s. Tales of stuffing cardboard into his shoes every day to reinforce worn-through soles, buying second-hand clothes from St. Vincent de Paul rumble sales and facing a steady diet of chicken à la king were his main themes. Granted, none of the womenfolk in his family were talented cooks. Most of them could barely poach an egg.

One of Dad's childhood friends, Walter Bent, was also raised without a father. Though very different in temperament, they remained pals through school, military service and later in married life. What marked Gil most was his fate of being raised by three generations of women. Even his sister Doreen was older and had her opinion as to what was best for Gil. On the one hand, he was the adored golden boy. His mother and grandmother doted on his consideration, cheerfulness and hard-working attitude. On the down side, he had no male role model for most of his formative years. Russell's presence was just a fleeting memory. His uncle Heywood was around for a while and played an active, nurturing part in Gil's development when he was sober. With Heywood's divorce and death following each other in rapid succession, Gil again felt abandoned by the only dominant male figure in his life. He could fall back on his friends' fathers for some support, but this didn't give him the guidelines he needed.

Some of Marjorie's and Gertrude's lady friends showed an active interest in Doreen and Gil but that was mostly confined to holidays. Doreen found escape from reality by joining movie star fan clubs, and in fantasies of leading a flashy life of her own in New York one day. Common to so many Depression-era children, Saturdays at the motion pictures promised a few happy hours of escape from poverty and hunger. They could observe the glamorous lives of beautiful people living in swank Manhattan penthouses, laugh at Shirley Temple's various musical escapades and enjoy the relatively innocent antics of *Our Gang*.

Towards the end of the Depression, two events marked the lives of the inhabitants of Alameda and the surrounding Bay Area. The first was the opening of the San Francisco Bay Bridge in 1936, linking the nascent naval base on Treasure Island to both the City and the suburban areas of the East Bay. The second was the arrival of the World's Fair in San Francisco in 1940, paving the way for a wave of new prosperity in the Golden State. America's entry into WWII brought with it a considerable boom for the state of California. It ensured mass employment with the railroads, in factories and canneries, at naval bases and in shipbuilding. Marjorie and Doreen hired on to work at the shipyards during the war years while Gil took odd jobs and pursued a new fad.

He had read about a new phenomenon called weight lifting promoted by a novice nutritionist and health freak called Jack Lalanne. At sixteen Gil joined Clancy's gym in Oakland and devoted a year to his physical make-over. By his 17th birthday he had acquired an impressive physique and gained the self-confidence to successfully fudge his age and join the Navy in 1944. He was trained as a cook on an attack cargo ship patrolling the endangered Pacific. Active duty took him to Guam and Hawaii before General MacArthur signed the armistice in Tokyo Bay in August of 1945. The remaining years of service saw Gil in the peacekeeping forces

in Japan, witnessing first-hand a defeated and broken people and their crumbling social structure. When he was released from service and disembarked in Alameda, Doreen was on her way to test her mettle in New York.

Meanwhile, the family's finances had forced a downscaling. For a while during the war years Marjorie took in boarders, but this was not a viable long-term solution. Too many of these single men were shiftless and unreliable. The result was the sale of the family home and a move to a smaller house being built on reclaimed land in Alameda.

By this stage in time Marjorie had also married again. She didn't have better luck the second time, nor did the marriage last longer than a handful of troubled years. The new husband was an abusive alcoholic who rent the close ties between Gertrude and Marjorie. Gertrude could not live under the same roof with him and insisted that they build an independent studio onto the back of the house where she could be on her own. There she would have more natural light to paint by as her own eyesight failed.

In 1947 Gil was still living under his mother's roof on Fernside Boulevard. That same year Gertrude, then in her eighties, succumbed to a thrombosis in Gil's arms. She had taken a fall on the back steps leading up to her attic studio. A doctor was called to the house to set the broken bone but in applying a tourniquet, he may have done more damage than good. With Gertrude's demise, distant relatives came out of the woodwork to join old friends and fellow community artists in mourning her passing.

Marjorie divorced Mr. Bolton shortly thereafter and sorely needed an income. She moved herself into the studio apartment and rented the rest of the house to a family. Through old retail connections in San Francisco, she got a job selling porcelain in one of the City's finer department stores. This was the status quo when Gil brought a prospective bride by one Sunday in 1949. One of my

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mother's many skills was her cooking: she gave great importance to planning and presenting well-balanced meals. This wasn't unheard of in the white bread-eating America of the late 1940s, but it was rare indeed.



Barbara at 19, before her wedding

Chapter 2:

Barbara's story

Mom was born in Denver, Colorado, one cold October day in 1930 into a less artistic family with far too many repressed emotions. Her father, Bernie Manka, was a first-generation Polish-American, born and raised in the coal mining town of Scranton, PA. Grandpa Bernie was the eldest of seven children, and was coerced at a young age by his hard-working, driven parents into raising his siblings. His father, Felix, had run away from enlistment into the Prussian Army by leaving his parents' farm in Silesia with his elder brother, Jan. The brothers made their way to Danzig and boarded a ship bound for New York. As landless farmers with no other learned skills, the brothers landed in the coal mines of predominately Polish and Italian Scranton at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Bernie's mother, Stella, was from a village north of Warsaw. She immigrated along with her parents in 1902 and settled in Scranton. Felix and Stella met at a church dance and married in 1904, shortly after Stella's seventeenth birthday. Growing up in the working-class neighborhood of Peacock Hill, Bernie went to Polish parochial school, and learned English as a second language. Though born on American soil, he and his siblings had a pronounced Polish accent when speaking English all their lives.

While Felix was putting in long shifts at the mines, Stella augmented the family income by taking in sewing and making hats. These she sold to the posh millineries in town, from which she received a steady flow of new commissions. More ambitious than her husband, Stella insisted on learning English and called on Bernie to help her with reading and writing. This is where Bernie saw his chance to escape.

Upon graduation from high school, Bernie refused to hire on at the mines and end up like his father and uncles, coughing up black phlegm every night. Instead, he obtained enlistment papers for the U.S. Navy. During an hour of English exercises, Stella unwittingly signed on the proverbial dotted line, acknowledging and authorizing her son's induction. Thus, Bernie vanished one fine day from Scranton to be shipped out to the Philippines, leaving behind a startled and worried family. After four peaceful years at sea, Bernie returned briefly to Scranton to make amends for his deception before setting off for the promises of the West Coast. This venture led him to San Francisco where he met Catherine on a double blind date.

Mom's mother Catherine was also born into a strict Catholic family, but her parents came from Italy. She was the second youngest of six girls and one boy born to a prosperous saloon-keeper in Louisville, Colorado. Her mother, Maria di Domenico, had emigrated to America from a picturesque yet poverty-stricken village in the Appenines as a young girl with her parents, cousins, aunts and uncles. A narrow-guage railroad link had already been established between Naples and the isolated mountain villages to expedite emigration from the rural heartland to points in North and South America. They used this new service to reach the port of Naples, and their first ever glimpse of the sea, in autumn of 1876. Like so many others before them, the di Domenicos landed at Ellis Island for processing before continuing their travels west to Denver by train.

Maria's schooling in Colorado was limited to a few years since the needs and priorities of family life back then had other views on the education of girls. At 17, she was married to a silver miner. At 18, Maria had her first daughter. By the age of 20, she was widowed; a collapsing mine shaft buried her husband. Through the auspices of the Chamber of Commerce linking the towns of Louisville, Colorado, with Carovilli, Italy, a continuous stream of new

immigrants arrived from the homeland to join friends and relatives who had devoted a few years to settling down and opening up their businesses. One of these immigrants was Eusebio di Frangia---young, single, family-oriented and ambitious. He married Maria in 1889 and together they extended the family she had already started. When Catherine came along in 1905, her family owned a large white clapboard house complete with indoor plumbing and a telephone. Given this state of relative prosperity, she had a carefree childhood liberated from most of the household chores delegated to her older sisters.

Like all bubbles, this one burst one winter's day in 1914. Maria and Eusebio had just returned from a visit to relatives in Italy when Crown Prince Ferdinand was assassinated and Europe was led to war. More devastating on a personal level was the severe case of pneumonia that carried off Eusebio to an early grave in 1915. His death at 47 left behind a prosperous business and some small land holdings...and a very large family to feed.

Maria's eldest daughter joined a convent and moved to Denver. The next oldest was married off to a walnut farmer in Oregon, sight unseen. Camillo came from the home village of Carovilli, was hard-working and religious. That was enough to appease Maria. The rest of the children were at various points of schooling. Her only son, Nicolas, was too young to take over the operation of the business. With no one in the immediate family to run the lucrative saloon, Maria ended up selling it and the house and moving her family to Denver.

When Catherine and her youngest sister, Carol, finished high school, they went on to a trade school to learn typing and stenography. On a visit to a sister living in San Francisco, Catherine and Carol went out dancing one Saturday evening at a club. Both young ladies met their first husbands that very night. For Carol, Jack was her first and only husband, though he bore the stigma of divorce.

She had to fight her mother on the issue of marrying a non-Italian but Carol succeeded and had the happiest marriage of all her siblings. Jack was at least a Catholic Croatian.

Catherine and Bernie dated regularly, marrying in 1929 as the result of a false alarm. Catherine was so naïve that she thought a delayed menses automatically qualified her as pregnant. When Bernie lost his job at Nabisco due to massive lay-offs following the Crash of 1929, the newlyweds moved back to Denver to live in Maria's rambling brick house. Meanwhile, Catherine did become pregnant, bringing my mother, Barbara, into the world at the family home on October 19th 1930.

Growing up in an extended family spelled out the happiest years of Barbara's childhood. Her parents' rather loveless marriage guaranteed that she would have no siblings. Yet every second house on the block was occupied by one great-aunt or another and their broods of young cousins. As soon as she could walk, Barbara went from house to house seeking out playmates here, a freshly-baked *pizzelle* there. Mom inherited her work ethic from Grandma Maria. As a child she was taught how to knead and roll out dough for pasta, cook polenta and sit quietly at austere family funerals. Though just 60, Maria had not only lost two husbands; she had buried two daughters lost to cancer and her only son in a tragic fire accident. While both of her parents went off to work, Barbara was raised by her dour but affectionate *nonna*.

Catherine and Bernie's marriage, based as it was on a false pretence and religious duty, had a short lifespan. Although divorce was scorned in Catholic circles, it provided an option to women in the 1930s to escape bad marriages. Bernie and Catherine first separated, then petitioned for divorce in 1938. While Bernie moved to Los Angeles for a job with Bethlehem Steel, Catherine left Denver for the San Francisco Bay Area. Her sisters Teresa and Carol had married railroad men and settled in Hayward and Stockton,

respectively. Their husbands had secure jobs with the Western Pacific and each couple had recently bought a home. Full of optimism, Catherine settled on a flat at Oakland's Lake Merritt as her new address.

There was one considerable disadvantage to this rash decision. Although the two-bedroom apartment Catherine had found opposite the lake was near the jewellery store where she got a job as a saleswoman, housing laws had a surprise for her. There was a dire shortage of housing at that time in the Bay Area. This stipulated that renters could only share accommodation with adult children not minors. In view of this, Catherine was obliged to accept a female flat-mate to share costs while searching for a solution to the dilemma of Barbara's housing.

Barbara wanted to continue living with her grandmother in Denver, where she was in school and had lots of friends. Parents' emotions being what they are, Catherine wanted her daughter closer to where she herself lived. The solution was to farm Barbara out to live with her Aunt Teresa and Uncle Pete in Hayward. This way, Catherine could spend weekends with her daughter and have a clear conscience that she had decided for the best. Many decades of painfully kept secrets finally proved that Barbara would have been much better off in Maria's care back in Denver.

As the late 1930s gave way to the war years of the early 1940s, Aunt Teresa (Trae) also found work at Western Pacific railroad, thus contributing to the financial well-being of the small family. Unknowingly though she was leaving Barbara alone, young and vulnerable to her husband's sexual depredations. The war years made the housing situation in the Bay Area even more acute. Even if Catherine had the slightest notion of what was happening behind closed doors in not-so-distant Hayward, she was helpless to remedy the situation. Bernie had remarried, bought a house in Downey and offered to have Barbara come live with him. Mom was all for it as

she loved her step-mother more than her own mother. However, Catherine would not relinquish her legal custody, forcing Barbara to keep body and soul together until the armistice.

A second marriage for Catherine ensued, allowing a move into a house where Barbara was more than welcome. Finishing high school in 1948, Barbara pursued her studies of secretarial skills in order to land an office job and gain a modicum of independence. She also re-established contact with her old childhood friend from Denver, Patsy Mann. At 18, Mom was mature beyond her years and eager to strike out on her own. Noone would guess that she harbored a nasty temper, and was not one to be crossed.

Patsy's family had moved to Oakland in the early 1940s to work in the shipyards. The girls' mothers were neighbors in Denver and corresponded over the years. Now that the girls had grown up and shared several interests, they began to go out on double dates. Since Barbara had a terrific figure, flowing auburn curls and a ready smile, she was very popular with the boys. Patsy was not as attractive and soon settled for a nice boy from Texas named Bill.. Bill knew Gil from work at the Western Pacific and brought him along one Saturday night to meet Patsy and her pal, Barbara. Though their ethnic backgrounds were poles apart, Barbara and Gil had both been raised by divorced mothers and protective grandmothers during very hard economic times. Moreover, they both had a mass of emotional wounds lying just under a well-camouflaged surface.

Grandma Maria had always counseled Barbara to marry an Italian Catholic, citing Catherine's divorce as proof of her argument. But the younger generation was of another opinion. The 1940s and 50s were awash with romance as portrayed in Hollywood films and movie magazines. Love marriages peppered with a hint of rebellion were more in mode than economical or religious arrangements. Barbara didn't shun the attentions of attractive Italian and Portuguese boys, but she fell for Gil's golden boy image of health, good looks

and vulnerability. In due course, the prospective in-laws met each other and a July wedding was planned. Patsy and Doreen served as bridesmaids while Bill was Gil's best man. After the wedding in July of 1950, the newlyweds spent their honeymoon at Yosemite National Park, an old Brooks family tradition. That was the first and only time Barbara would go camping in her life.

Though the couple wanted to start out married life with fresh ideas and clarity, certain concessions had to be made on both sides. Barbara never felt she was a wanted child, an emotional scar she carried all her life. She knew Bernie grew to love her but she always felt she was a burden to her elegant, selfish mother. To compensate for these scrambled emotions, she wanted to be a model mother. Gil had absolutely no idea what parenting involved, still being for the most part an overgrown kid himself. Dr. Spock was the then leading authority on child rearing and gave my parents some basic guidelines. After two years of what was proving to be a difficult adjustment for both parties, Barbara realized she was pregnant.

"A child just might save this marriage" was her thinking at the time. One morning in mid-February 1953, I was born in Oakland, California.



Gil and Barbara's wedding, July 5, 1950

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Chapter 3:

Getting my bearings

My earliest childhood memories are of the track house my parents bought in San Leandro in 1955 for \$4,000. One of hundreds identical in square footage and room count,, only their location on a given grid lent these homes the least bit of individuality. Barbara, Gil and I had previously lived in Alameda, in a first floor apartment carved out of an old Victorian not far from Dad's childhood home. With the arrival of their first grandchild, Marjorie and Catherine chipped in on the down payment for the house at 378 Aloha Drive--a deceptively exotic address in an otherwise colorless suburb.

I cannot recall ever having the house to myself as an unlimited expanse of crawling and climbing space. By the time I was alert enough to take in dimensions, mark out limits and make my first, wobbly steps, Barbara was nursing my brother, Brian. Following family tradition, Gil had planted fruit trees in our large backyard and together the young parents had carried on the custom of documenting their offspring's growth and development with photo albums. This was already 1955, and many parents had discovered the appeal of making home movies of their children at birthday parties, at holidays and taking their first steps into the world. This became a colorful, moving tribute to progress in the Baby Boom years.

Though my earliest memories do not go back to the rented flat in Alameda, fading snapshots in my album attest to the fact that we did live there at some point. Photos show me crawling across the lawn only to discover the magic of the garden hose with a pistol attachment. In other snapshots I'm being proudly held aloft by various doting grandparents and relatives. At Easter of 1953 I even feature in a genealogical display at Aunt Carol's house in Stockton.

In the shade of the broad front veranda stand great-grandmother Maria, Catherine and Barbara, holding and pointing me towards the camera. Sadly, Maria died of the complications of advanced age and diabetes in June of that year, long before I could get around to asking her questions about her own childhood.

I also seemed to be a born traveller. Barely a year old and I was posing with Grandpa Bernie at Knott's Berry Farm in Los Angeles. Gil made sure I would not grow up with a fear of sea by wading with me at Seal Beach. Back in Alameda, Grandma Marjorie is shown nuzzling with me in her backyard when I'm not lying on an air mattress in the shade, snoozing away. Grandma Catherine is on hand for Christmas and birthday parties where I stand out among an array of presents or behind a mesmerizing large devil's food cake. By the time Brian appears on the scene we've shifted venue to 378 Aloha Drive, and I have to relinquish the kitchen sink to my baby brother as the non plus ultra bathtub in the center of family life.

We were now living in a neighborhood with a lot of like-aged kids. Young friends start to fill in the places at birthday parties vacated by receding older relatives. By the time I turned four, I had established distinct liaisons with some of my peers. A trained child psychologist would have summed me up as latent gay then and there. I turned my pug nose up at a variety of neighborhood boys and their rough and tumble ways to play with Chrissy, an independent and no-nonsense toddler living two doors away. We had a wonderful time digging our way to China in a corner of my backyard or playing hide-and-seek in the bamboo forest dominating a large section of hers. When we got around to playing doctor and nurse there was no question of any hanky-panky. Christine and I were too busy caring for all the wounded soldiers during re-enactments of the Civil War. When we got around to playing cowboys and Indians, I was a Sioux chief and Chrissy was my squaw, fighting against General Custer's advancing army. Another neighborhood girl, Roxanne, used to vie

for my attention and butt in on our games. But she was too bossy and cunning for my taste. Besides, she kept trying to trick me into kissing her.

The summer before I started kindergarten, we took a trip in the old white Dodge to Oregon to visit Mom's aunt and uncle. Aunt Margaret had married Camillo to satisfy her mother's wish that at least one of her daughters take an Italian-born spouse. They had three children who were all grown up with families of their own, except for cousin Vera. She was the only rebel in the family. Eloping with a sailor at the age of 18, she found a convenient means of escaping the tedium of farm life in Roseburg. That the marriage didn't last long was secondary; it brought Vera to the San Francisco Bay Area and big city life. But, more on cousin Vera later.

Since Uncle Camillo was 'old country', he prided himself on the fact that he had gone to school in Italy where he acquired his elegant, old-fashioned penmanship. His Christmas cards always stood out; their envelopes were minor works of art, full of elaborate curlicues and swirls and gently slanted cross-strokes. They took pride of place on our mantlepiece year for year. Better yet Uncle Camillo had walnut and cherry orchards, my two favorite things in the world. I was really excited to meet them despite Vera's stories of how stern her folks were.

Not surprisingly, Uncle Camillo took to me immediately when I told him I wanted to help him harvest the fruit. Brian was still too small to help out and spent most of the days watching Westerns on TV. But I'd be up early and accompany Uncle Camillo on his tractor to the cherry orchard where he had child-sized baskets and a ladder poised for my use. Apparently, I spent the entire two weeks picking fruit and loving every minute of it. I made up songs and stuffed myself with the ripe and juicy Bing cherries. What was left were baked into pies.

Uncle Camillo's eating habits were 'old country' too. He insisted on pasta at lunch and dinner as a first course. Kids love spaghetti anyway, so this was a boon even little Brian could appreciate. Before we left, Uncle Camillo gave us each a set of toys he had carved out of walnut shells as a souvenir of our visit. Unfortunately, we never went to Oregon again, although Uncle Camillo continued to write and invite us back in his Christmas greetings. He and Aunt Margaret lived well into their nineties on the farm, eventually having to sell it and move into town. Gil did plant an English walnut tree in our backyard after that trip. In years to come the fruits of this tree would be spread out on newspapers to dry on the garage floor. Mom had a very pronounced work ethic and didn't believe in leaving kids idle for long spells. On wet winter days, when Brian and I got restless in the house, she taught us how to hull, sort and crack the nuts. She would then check on our progress, putting the cleaned nut meats into huge Mason jars for the year's baking.

Since Brian and I didn't have any first cousins, we adopted Mom's. The only difficulty was the vast discrepancy in our ages. Aunt Carol's son, Jack, was great fun and would take us to play pee-wee golf during family visits to Stockton. However, he was already in his early twenties and was on his way to college and marriage in a year's time. Vera was supposedly even older than Mom, making her ancient, and was not particularly child-friendly despite the fact that she worked in a candy store. But she had funny stories to tell and always brought a two-pound box of See's when she and Uncle Johnny came by to visit. Uncle Johnny was an ex-boxer who owned and ran a bar in downtown Oakland. Dad and Brian were fascinated by his tales of the boxing ring and bootlegging in Chicago in the early 1930s. He liked kids, drove a shiny red Cadillac and always brought us a big box of cream puffs and eclairs from Oakland's best French bakery. "When you get older", he promised me, "I'll teach you bartending". Little did our parents believe he would keep this

promise. But everything he told us was true, and came to pass as he predicted. Meanwhile, loads of other distant cousins were growing up in Denver and Scranton. We would not get around to meeting them for some time yet.

The first day of kindergarten spelled out unknown terrors and changes in my daily routine, and arrived one warm September day in 1958. There were six of us kids, lined up in two well-balanced rows, polished and pressed to perfection, posing for the cameras held by our teary-eyed and proud mothers. After the photo session, we marched a very long way to school, in pairs, a clutch of anxious mothers both leading and following their offspring into the world of education. From that day on, the neighborhood mothers took turns escorting the jubilant bunch of kindergarteners from Aloha Drive to the distant grounds of James Monroe Elementary School. Thus ended the limited scope of neighborhood associations as I came to meet kids from other track home projects and ethnic backgrounds.

For much of my early childhood I thought the only way to get from place to place in the East Bay was via the Nimitz Freeway. It ran parallel to Aloha Drive, separated from our street by a broad and weed-infested field owned by a cranky old Chinese lady we used to tease unmercifully. Two miles in one direction brought us to Aunt Trae's house in Hayward. Ten miles in the opposite direction took us past Uncle Johnny's bar at the junction of Broadway in Oakland and to the Webster Street tunnel to Alameda. Once we emerged from the illuminated tube of green tiles into beautiful Alameda, it was only a matter of a few right turns before we pulled up at Grandma Marjorie's house on Fernside Boulevard. Depending on the purpose of our trip, we sometimes stopped at a bakery outlet along the way which was famous for its crunchy oatmeal cookies. The cookies were stored in shiny tin containers the size of a standard family garbage can and were sold in two-pound paper bags. They were guaranteed to fill the car with a buttery, vanilla aroma within

minutes. Dad put me in charge of holding the bag making it impossible not to secretly open it and snatch one. I also had to give Brian one to keep him quiet.

Directly across the Nimitz freeway was Skaggs-Stone, a depot where Dad worked as a warehouseman. A stone's throw towards downtown Oakland, crouching behind a meshed wire fence, was an abandoned factory of old brick and broken windowpanes. Dad used to say that Jack London worked there as a kid before he stowed away on a ship for the South Seas. At that age, I believed everything my parents said. I suppose most kids do. Yet, on one of our Sunday drives beyond the network of the Nimitz Freeway, across the Golden Gate bridge into terra incognita, we visited the ruins of Jack London's home outside Glen Ellen in the Valley of the Moon. In the museum were exotic artifacts from his various journeys and a photograph of the very same factory we often passed in its heyday.

From time to time, we would take the Nimitz due north to visit Patsy and Bill and their two boys in Berkeley. Dad would turn on the car radio to some upbeat station and sing along. Mom was also in a good mood. In retrospect, I think the adults had the most fun, judging by all their laughter and spelled-out words they shared. Kids thrown together for an afternoon don't always get along so well, but Glenn and Bobby were different. Glenn and I found common ground watching episodes of *Perry Mason* and deciding we wanted to be attorneys when we grew up. Brian and Bobby were still at the building block stage, and were busy in another room with construction projects. The same pretty much applied when we would drop by on Dad's childhood friend, Walter Bent, and his family in Vallejo. Walter's two kids lived under such a strict, militaristic regimen that they were afraid to say boo in more than a hushed tone. I was too young to know what the word introverted meant when Mom spelled it out to Dad in the car. Yet, judging by Danny and Jodine's timid quiet behavior I had a picture in my mind that I could

later explain to Brian. We were both happy to have such relatively easy-going and permissive parents.

Kindergarten led to first grade and Miss Michelsen's pitch pipe. At exactly 8:30 a.m., right after roll-call, we would all rise to pledge allegiance to the flag. Miss Michelsen would pipe out a few test notes as a signal of her readiness. Her cheeks would puff out in ruddy patriotism as though this were her favorite part of the day. She must have once had grand musical aspirations since she led us from the pledge to one patriotic song after another. Other home rooms got off with just the daily pledge before moving on to fun things. Apart from her zealous singing, Miss Michelsen was heavy-set, middle-aged, a bit frumpy and very good-natured. She reminded me of Grandma Marjorie but with red hair. And she had a stash of Tootsie Rolls that she would dole out to kids for good behavior, just like our grandma did.

Midway through the school year I had my seventh birthday and Barbara outdid herself as snapshots and home movies demonstrate. Mid-February was no time for an outdoor party. Instead Mom made a *pinata*, hung it from a crossbeam in the garage and sent out invitations to my playmates to come and celebrate Mexican-style. This was a great success, even though I couldn't get anywhere near hitting the pinata with the stick with my eyes blindfolded. Ricky Threet's well-aimed smack burst the *pinata*, releasing candy and small favors to the excited screams of kids rushing to fill their pockets. For years after that Ricky was my hero and best friend.

When I got home from school Brian would tell me about one exciting event or another that had taken place on Aloha Drive. One day, it would be the Oscar Mayer weenie truck passing by, handing out tiny sausage-shaped whistles for the kids as a promotion gimmick. I didn't believe him until he pulled one out of a pocket in his overalls to show me. From then on, for a couple of weeks, we hounded Mom to buy Oscar Mayer products for the kids' toys hidden

in the packaging. Then Pierre, a Frenchman, would appear out of the blue on his tricycle with an aluminium ice chest mounted over the front handlebars. He sold the few toddlers not in school snow cones and other flavored ices. But he must have gotten discouraged over the course of that school year. When school vacation came along in June a motorized ice cream truck took over his turf and signaled its regular arrival with a telltale musical jingle.

The story I had the most trouble believing concerned the visit of Elsie the Cow from the neighborhood drive-thru dairy. Brian swore he saw her pulling an old-fashioned dairy wagon along our street, dispensing white and chocolate milk in tiny mugs to the children that gathered around. Naturally, it wasn't Elsie doing the divvying up; she was strapped into harness too busy spreading cow patties on the otherwise spotless street. The accompanying dairyman distributed the mugs of milk and cleverly told the kiddies where their parents could buy more of it. From then on, Brian was hooked on chocolate milk well into his teens.

A block and a half away from our house was the area's first draft of a strip mall. Embee's and Woolworth's provided for most of our basic grocery needs. Catty-corner to this new complex was the drive-thru dairy. We went through a wire rack of six quart bottles every couple of days so that short trips in the car to the dairy became another ritual of suburban childhood. Milk wasn't delivered door to door in motorized America; you had to drive to get it. The milkman was invariably some teenage kid from the neighborhood working on a part-time basis. In his snow-white uniform, name sewn in red letters across his left breast shirt pocket and wearing a crisply starched white cap, the dairyman would swiftly swap our rack of empties for one brown and five white bottles pulled from a huge refrigerator. The bottles were beaded in cold sweat; the paper plugs held firmly in place by a thick coat of risen cream. For his milk shakes and our dessert, Gil would put in an ice cream order for one

of the five standard flavors. The dairy also did street trade in pre-packaged popsicles and fresh ice cream cones at the miniscule soda fountain off to the front. By the time Brian and I were big and brave enough to cross busy Washington Boulevard the dairy had gone out of business. There went my early aspirations of an ideal job when I grew up. The teenaged boys always looked so delectable in their spotless whites, and what could be more fun than selling people ice cream?

Since Gil sorely felt the absence of a male role model while he was growing up, he somehow became the unofficial neighborhood Dad by the time I learned how to ride a bicycle. He relished the role, despite admonitions from Barbara to devote more of his little free time to his own two sons. By the time I was seven, Gil had organized basketball and baseball games for older neighborhood kids whose own fathers either had little time and less interest or, in one case, had died tragically in a car accident. Brian and I were too young to actively participate in these sports events and were relegated to the sidelines. As this routine of watching others at play soon became boring, I turned inwards to entertain myself. Reading as a form of fun and escape was a pleasure I had grown up with and taken for granted from a young age.

Barbara was an avid reader, whether curled up on the sofa with a best seller for an hour every afternoon or lulling me to sleep with a fairy tale. Gil soon adopted this habit and would take turns reading to me at bedtime. Thus, I grew up with enormous respect for the magic of the printed word. By the time I had marched from kindergarten into first grade, I was rereading favorite fairy tales to myself when I should have been taking an afternoon nap. In time I became a fascinated reader of adventure stories and biographies of white, black and red-skinned historical figures. Siding with fictional underdogs from a very early age, I spent many of my childhood years losing myself in books in retaliation for being ignored by a father

preoccupied elsewhere with other people's children. In hindsight, I can appreciate Gil's nurturing attention to the pair of fatherless boys, both in their early teens and floundering in school. It surely brought back his own painful memories along with a concerted wish to do right by them and not abandon them in their hour of need. But they were not his primary responsibility.

I never showed the least talent, ambition or interest in competitive sports. In fact, I hated competition on most levels, be it the tug of war for parental recognition or winning the affection of other adults. Meanwhile Chrissy and Roxanne had formed a girls' league to the exclusion of all boys, so I had also lost my hitherto favorite playmate on the block. When Mom would force me to leave the peace and quiet of my bedroom for the sunshine and fresh air outdoors, I would prefer to hop on my bike and take off for the school grounds rather than be a bystander at some Sunday neighborhood game.

I don't mean to give the impression that Gil gave up on me outright. That insidious decision came along when I was ten and escalated from there. Prior to that Dad would teach Brian and I to fly kites in March, to swim and dive in the summer and to pick seasonal fruit from the trees in our yard in autumn. I loved seeing movies on the big screen, as did Dad, so occasionally we would take in a Roman epic or Western in San Francisco as a special treat. Back then, theaters had smoking and non-smoking areas. When I went with Dad, we could sit in the middle, non-smoking section, and I'd have a better view. Whenever Mom took me to a Walt Disney film, I'd be stuck in one of the side sections, craning my neck around taller adults, the screen blurred by a smoky blue haze which choked all the pleasure of the film out of me.

To compensate for my outings with Mom, Gil would take Brian to San Francisco Giants baseball games, the first of which I also had to attend. He must have hoped it would awaken in me some buried

enthusiasm for sports. It was agonizingly boring. I'd had two hotdogs and a soda and couldn't wait to get home and watch TV. Then the game went into extra innings. Why was I being punished like this? Fortunately, I had brought a book along just in case something like this happened. And it was the last time I was ever taken to a live sports event...until professional wrestling came along a few years later. This passing fancy was born from a local TV station broadcasting rather staged matches every Friday evening. Dad must have thought it would butch me up so he called up the station in Oakland to request three audience passes. These arrived a few weeks later so he, Brian and I were soon sitting in the bleachers waiting for the televised spectacle to begin.

To be honest, I was more curious about the staging and behind-camera work than the actual matches. I began to understand camera angles and lighting effects, saw what a boom was and waited for the amateurish wrestlers to enter the ring. Their massive muscular bodies, oiled for extra effect and highlighted with tattoos, did nothing for me sexually. Frankly, my father looked better in the buff than these goons did in their skimpy Tarzan outfits. It was only the narrator's commentary off-stage that gave this charade any sense of drama. The wrestlers themselves went through a pat set of grips, throws and pins that looked more painful on television at home than they did live and close-up. In a way it was fun, and gave Dad his chance to ham it up for the camera panning the audience. He was so excited about being on TV that Mom had been asked to "watch us" at home.

Dad was a great one for Sunday drives, exercise and fresh air. The part about fresh air certainly resonated with me. We lived in a permanent miasma of cigarette smoke at home. Any pleas to open windows or a door to ventilate were met with denial. For pocket money, I used to volunteer to clean our windows and mirrors. Even the dust collected on the outside window panes could not compare

with the yellow film I wiped off the inside glass. The second-hand smoke had not obviously discolored any of our soft furnishings, but tht might be because everyone used to smoke then and we didn't notice it. Still, I had a creeping suspicion that this wasn't a healthy practice. Mom finally conceded and let me open my bedroom windows in the summer. She wasn't about to pay for escaping heat during the winter months!

On these rare occasions where Mom wanted to stay home and read, Dad and I would spend the day hiking around Mt. Tamalpais, roaming through Muir Woods or driving through the Wine Country around Napa. When Mom felt like a change of scenery, we'd head to her favorite spots--Carmel and Monterey. On long holiday weekends we might drive up the California coast to Fort Bragg and explore the residual Russian culture of that early settlement, or down to San Juan Capistrano to witness the year's sparrow migration. I was studying state history at school at that point, so the more missions I got to visit, the more I had to share in class. Besides, anything foreign fascinated me for as long as I can remember so all these flights of fancy to unknown parts were both fun and educational. I found I liked being out of doors in natural surroundings as long as I wasn't expected to compete for my father's attention. He loved to talk, and I liked to listen; providing an attentive audience brought us closer...for a while.

The year of 1960 wound down with a particularly sad event just before Thanksgiving. One Saturday afternoon, Dad summoned Brian and me to my bedroom. This was astonishing as we had not misbehaved, and Gil was not the authoritarian type to bend our ears with speeches. As best he could, he tried to tell us that Grandma Marjorie had gone to join the angels. Then he broke into tears. We'd never seen Dad cry...ever. Then it dawned on us what he was trying to say and we, too, began to cry with him.

Dad had found Marjorie dead in the upstairs studio apartment at Fernside Boulevard. She had suffered a heart attack while having dinner and fallen to the floor where she collapsed face-down on the Persian carpet. This had occurred a couple of days before, according to the coroner's report, and Grandma was not a pretty sight, according to Dad. Both parents agreed that Brian and I should be spared the morbidity of funerals. They had been forced to attend so many as children in their grandmothers' care. We spent the wet and dismal November day with Aunt Trae, learning how to play poker, while Marjorie's funeral and cremation took place in Alameda.

The first of many spooky events that subsequently occurred was when we found presents from Grandma Marjorie under the Christmas tree a month after she had died. And it wasn't just that year when gifts appeared. She had bought well-thought-out gifts for Brian and me for the next few years and given them to Barbara for safe-keeping. Here I was such a curious child and I could hardly remember Grandma Marjorie a year after she died, except for her loud speech, dusty rose scent and jolly laugh. How did she know where my interests would lay in the future?

One year, I received a microscope, since I had told her I wanted to become a doctor when I grew up (no longer interested in law, despite my fascination with *Perry Mason's* character). Another year, it was a collection of minerals and stones, carefully labeled and mounted, in time for my first natural science class. When I got to the first course of American history in grammar school, I had a packet of authentic Confederate banknotes from my deceased grandmother to proudly display at show and tell. The last gift was one which gave me much solace then as well as in later years. It was a collection of classical music LPs I received for my tenth birthday. How insightful of Marjorie to think that by the age of ten I would be mature enough to appreciate these beautiful melodies. Of course, she had no idea we wouldn't keep her piano to carry on the tradition of music in the

home. Often times, I would listen to these LPs over and over, dreaming of distant places where the Moldau and blue Danube flowed. Then Barbara would burst my bubble with a sharp knock on my bedroom door. I thought the music was too loud for her and was bringing on one of her migraines but it wasn't that. She was a stickler when it came to writing prompt thank-you notes, and asked if I had written one yet. How could I in a case like this? Where should I send it? Not one to be caught without an answer, Mom suggested I say a thank-you prayer at bedtime. Grandma Marjorie would be sure to hear it.

The grown-ups didn't get around to sorting through Marjorie's belongings until after New Year 1961. For four consecutive weekends in January we spent all day at the house on Fernside Boulevard. Aunt Doreen and Uncle Art would drive over from San Francisco and meet us in the backyard. Dad knew where Marjorie kept the key to the garage so he did the honors one crisp Saturday morning by unlocking and swinging open the garage doors to the amazement of all assembled. The single-car garage had been packed full to capacity with cardboard boxes flush right up to the doors themselves. Dad and Uncle Art began to disassemble the wall of neatly stacked boxes, spreading them out over the grassy surface of the yard for Doreen and Barbara to sort through.

I remember the event as if it were yesterday: the musty smell of damp cardboard and the excitement of discovery as each box was opened. It didn't carry the magic of Christmas, but the trimmings and treasures were food for my imagination for years to come. Marjorie was a consummate hoarder, but to what extent wasn't apparent until four weekends later. As Gil and Art bored their way deeper into the heart of the garage, it was clear to even my eyes that all these collectibles were a testimony to Marjorie's life.

There were boxes full of newspapers recording Teddy Roosevelt's storming of San Juan Hill in Puerto Rico during the

Spanish-American War, an assassination attempt on the life of President William McKinley during a state visit to San Francisco and the 1906 earthquake. For obvious reasons, this last theme merited a box of newspapers all its own. Both World Wars were carefully documented with ongoing reportages in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Further boxes were chock-a-block with autographed sheet music from the 1930s. The names Bing Crosby, Al Jolson and Rudy Vallee could be deciphered in the fading ink. While I was sifting through these yellowed stacks of fragile newsprint, Doreen had uncovered a box of Chinese cloisonné pieces, decorative items in carved ivory and ebony hair combs with mother-of-pearl inlay work.

Barbara brought to light a collection of delicate ladies' fans, full-length kid leather gloves and black lace mantillas. Further boxes and suitcases yielded up assorted items of female attire from long-gone times. Barbara held up to the light exquisitely beaded headbands and flapper dresses in soft pastel colors for their first airing since the Roaring Twenties. There were embroidered stoles, elegant silk damask shoes, needlepoint handbags, matching gloves and stockings. In short, an array of complete original outfits ideal for a modern fancy dress party. I was caught speechless by the beauty of these garments, wanting to hold and examine them closely. Barbara must have thought this interest abnormal and assigned me a new task.

Pointing at a rosewood box resting on a chair, Barbara told me to go and play with that for awhile. The box had ornately carved feet and several narrow drawers adorned with brass dragon handles. Emptying the entire contents onto the lawn, I was confronted with a pile of bamboo-backed ivory tiles bearing Chinese symbols in four different colors. Quite a few ivory sticks fell out with the tiles and these, too, were engraved with curious signs. Setting down a box

nearby, Gil looked over and asked me what I was doing with Marjorie's mah-jongg set.

"What's *mah jongg*?", I asked. Dad didn't have time for long explanations, knowing my curiosity, and simply said, "a Chinese game...and no, I didn't know how to play it".

I puzzled over the pieces for quite some time. First, I ordered them according to color. Then I counted them. Then I started to see if there was more than one piece in each subgroup with the same symbol. When I had formed the tiles into neat stacks, wondering what their symbols stood for, Barbara woke me from my reverie to give her a hand. I loaded the tiles pell-mell back into their drawers and promised myself I'd look up the game's name in the encyclopedia when we got home.

Since the only form of death I had confronted so far was the loss of a hamster and a pair of goldfish, it took me three weeks to muster the necessary courage to climb the back steps up to Marjorie's vacant studio. Call it morbid, but I was curious as to what traces of her death had lingered on in the apartment. Barbara and Doreen had not yet gotten up there to start their sorting and packing, so all was exactly as it had been the last time Dad drove us over to visit with Grandma Marjorie early last November. Maybe it was just my imagination but I could still detect her powdery scent in the large, sunny room. What first caught my eye was a plate-sized brown stain on the thick red pile of the Persian carpet. I surmised that this must mark the spot where she came to rest, face-down, after succumbing to a coronary. Dad had cleared the table of dinner remnants and washed the dishes after having found her and notifying the coroner's office. I could still picture her, filling the frame of her rocking chair with her own volume and the folds of the polka dot silk dresses she used to wear, holding out a Tootsie Roll to me as an inducement to give her a hug. She was not nearly as vain as Grandma Catherine, who would dye her hair jet black in a tenacious attempt to maintain a youthful

appearance. Grandma Marjorie never went grey and had very few facial lines, due perhaps to her chubbiness. Brian surprised me by catching me unawares and announcing that Mom was unpacking lunch in the backyard.

Dad was sitting in a cane armchair he had uncovered in the garage, tears rolling down his face. With the insight of a seven-year-old I merely thought he was saddened by all the memories he was confronted with during these intense weekends. When I stole up beside him to ask if he was okay, he pointed to the yellow butterfly that was resting on his extended index finger. "This is a sign Grandma is in Heaven", he said. She had repeatedly told him in the last year of her life that she would come back briefly as a yellow butterfly to assure him that she had made it to the other side.

Back in the garage, Gil didn't even bother unloading some boxes. They were labeled and contained family photo albums, a manuscript and a magic lantern with dozens of packaged glass slides. Draped in sheeting were some of Gertrude's unsold oil paintings and hand-carved redwood garden ornaments. The display of goods was dazzling keeping in mind that Marjorie had displayed the finest pieces of Asian art in her studio apartment, and she was no spartan decorator. Aunt Doreen and Uncle Art had a lovely one-bedroom apartment on Chestnut Street in San Francisco, but little in the way of storage space. Marjorie's will stipulated that Doreen have first choice in the division of her estate. Doreen opted for a set of china, some of Gertrude's paintings, Marjorie's few pieces of jewellery and a few token cloisonné pieces her father had sent over from Shanghai in the first happy years of marriage. Her argument was that since we had a house and double garage, Gil could have the rest of the belongings and do with them as he saw fit.

This arrangement worked out ideally for us. We had plenty of bare wall space and ample storage possibilities in the attic for the cartons of historical mementos we could more carefully sort through

during the winter months. Barbara set to framing the exquisite selection of antique fans to decorate our dining room walls while Gil selected the best positions and lighting before mounting Gertrude's haunting still lifes in the living room. From one day to the next, our otherwise bland track house assumed the character of a connoisseur and collector. For the first time I took pride in living in a house whose décor no longer resembled that of our neighbors. Thanks to Mom's good taste in placing things just right, our home now had an eclectic style where every new item on display had a history to it.

A beautifully lacquered cherry-red Chinese stool became Brian's favorite piece of furniture to play on when he wasn't ringing the small bronze temple bell. I polished a filigreed brass globe to its original splendor for Barbara to convert into a hanging lamp. A tiny herd of ivory elephants were lined up according to size along one end of the mantelpiece while the rectangular ivory casket delicately carved with ancient Chinese motifs found a new home juxtaposed at the opposite corner. Over the mantelpiece came Gertrude's *Stroll in Muir Woods*---rich and tactile in its shades of browns and greens. Over my loud protestations, Marjorie's upright piano and vast collection of sheet music were sold along with her house. To take my mind off this enormous disappointment, I was put in charge of filing the newspapers in chronological order.

Rather than seeing it as a chore, this task gave me lots of ideas for school essays and filled my head with loads of questions. Now that I was eight I could read very well and immersed myself in the compendium of family lore residing in our attic. Besides, it gave me a temporary excuse not to hunker over a mountain of walnuts in our unheated garage!

The more discoveries I made, the more queries I had for Dad. Being confronted with this material testimony to his mother's and grandmother's lives seemed to revive his memory. He explained to me who all those distant relatives were in Marjorie's photo albums

and where certain treasures originally came from. The magic lantern, for example, was a gift to Marjorie from her Uncle Wade who had gone north during the Alaskan Gold Rush. He didn't find his fortune panning streams or mining the heart of the Mother Lode, but he documented the lives of Russian and Eskimo settlers in phenomenal pictorial detail. Some of his slides showed old whaling ships returning to port with a catch and the subsequent butchering of these whales for their blubber, ribs and oil. The ribs would later be splintered into manageable pieces and processed as corset stays. The oil from a particular gland was in great demand by the perfume industry while the blubber met the meat needs of the Eskimo population. Other slides featured the pioneer towns of Anchorage and Nome, dog sleds and the weather-beaten faces of characters he met and captured for posterity. I was then in my Jack London phase and gobbled up all this visual detail that fine author had described in words. Gil hadn't seen these travel mementos since he was a kid himself. One night after dinner he cleared one of our white living room walls and gave us a slide show.

As I foraged through carton after carton of old papers, sorting what we would donate to the Oakland Museum from what had intrinsic family interest, I came across a neatly typed manuscript by Adele Brooks. "Who was Adele Brooks?", I wondered. After concentrated exposure to all this new material, I was beginning to put pieces of the vast genealogical puzzle together. Yet, some names drew a complete blank. Dad came to the rescue. He gingerly leafed through one of Marjorie's albums to reveal the portrait of an elegant aristocratic woman in her late 60s posed in profile on their front lawn. She wore dark ankle-length skirts and top coat with a plumed hat placed jauntily on her puffy white hair.

Adele Brooks was great-grandpa Shelby's older sister. She was married to a lawyer until she divorced him in 1901 prior to his indictment for fraud. She had always lived in San Francisco and did

so even after the 1906 fire burnt down her mother's house on Eddy Street. Adele simply moved into a hotel and continued her career in journalism at the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Having been a dilettante in California's higher social circles, she found relief from the embarrassment of her ex-husband's conviction by joining Phoebe A. Hearst as a personal secretary and traveling companion. Thus it was Adele who had travelled to exotic places and collected the magnificent fans now decorating our dining room. The ostrich-plumed, ebony-handled one was from a trip to South Africa. The pale blue hand-painted silk one with a Louis XVI court motif and mother-of-pearl ribs was from France. Other lacy varieties were Spanish and Italian while one, made of bamboo slats and mounted with a folding screen of embossed and gilded paper, was clearly Japanese.

As to the manuscript I found it was an assignment from W.R. Hearst himself. When his much adored mother, Phoebe, succumbed to the Spanish flu in 1919, William Randolph commissioned Adele Brooks to write her biography. He made all family archives accessible to her for the rapid completion of the project in an effort to assuage the grief they both felt at the loss of this illustrious and extraordinary woman. That explained one large newspaper clipping I was having trouble allocating to the correct pile. Also from the *San Francisco Chronicle*, its entire front page was dedicated to Phoebe Hearst's funeral cortège and those forming it. Following the names of her son and his family was that of Miss Adele Brooks. I decided then and there to retreat to my bedroom and unravel the mystery.

As it came to pass there was little mystery involved. The manuscript was an interesting read which abruptly ended after the ladies' return to America following the coronation of Tsar Nicholas II in St. Petersburg. The subsequent socially active years in the Bay Area, particularly in the realm of women's rights and education, were missing. No mention was made of Mrs. Hearst's vast humanitarian

contributions and donations to U. C. Berkeley and other institutions. I sorted through the remaining boxes hoping to find the missing chapters, to no avail. I did discover genealogical notes made by Heywood Brooks, but nothing more in the way of typed text. Perplexed and angry, I asked Dad to conclude the story for me. "Nothing is missing", he told me. "That's all she wrote". W. R. Hearst, an impatient newspaper magnet, had given Adele a deadline she could not keep, and ended up commissioning someone else to finish the book.

"But what happened to Adele Brooks?" I asked.

"Now that's a mystery no one knows the answer to," he countered. Perhaps he had forgotten that she died in a nursing home in Santa Barbara in 1936.

Ever practical Barbara had little interest in keeping her dead mother-in-law's trousseau of spectacular, if outdated, clothing. Since many ensembles were complete down to the matching accessories, she re-packed and labeled them for donation, along with my tidy stacks of old *San Francisco Chronicles*, to the Oakland Museum. Certain pieces, though, she simply could not part with, so exquisite were they in execution. For all I know, they may still be wrapped in tissue paper and hiding in the deep reaches of her cedar-lined hope chest to this day. My next self-assigned project was the piecing together and elaboration of the uncovered genealogical notes scattered at the bottom of the last cardboard box.

As if conveyed by an eavesdropping angel, an invitation arrived that very week with a Los Gatos postmark. The Whitehills---whoever they might be---had invited us to visit them at Easter in two weeks time. Gil immediately called Doreen. Yes; she, too, had received an invitation. Neither of them had seen or heard from these eccentric cousins in decades. A bout of the flu had prevented them from attending Marjorie's funeral, they wrote, and it was time for a

reunion. I ran to fetch Dad's childhood photo album and see if there were any pictures of these strangers.

Leafing back to the year 1930, I found proof that they existed. One snapshot showed Russell holding Gil on his shoulders in front of a rambling, one-story wooden farmhouse badly in need of a lick of paint. Another featured Marjorie, Gertrude, Doreen and said cousins standing between their Model T Ford and the Whitehills' fruit orchard. So, there were four of them; three sisters and a brother. Dad had crept up on me, Indian-style, to say "No, there were five. But the oldest sister had a mind of her own, left the farm and died in a tragic automobile accident within a year". At that time, my favorite TV shows were the *Addams Family* and *The Munsters*, so you can well imagine what ghoulish images were crossing my eight year-old mind as I contemplated our upcoming visit.

Their house hadn't lost any of its spookiness even in broad daylight on that Easter Sunday. Having left the freeway heading south to Santa Cruz some time ago, Dad followed the complex instructions which brought us, after countless turns, to a dirt road flanked by orange trees. The house was visible at the end of the lane, though nearly lost in the all-encompassing shade of an enormous sycamore. The 'homestead', as the Whitehills referred to it, was a large, square construction of weathered wooden siding, gables and a broad front porch. Leaving a swirl of dust behind us, we pulled up and parked as they appeared standing on the porch in a neat line and waving to us. They were all ancient. Though in fact aged by only 30 years from the snapshots in Dad's album, their hairstyles and dress looked identical. Even brave Brian had a sinking feeling about this first encounter. I had recently seen the film *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* on television, and was now confronted with four siblings who seemed entirely lost in time.

After the death of their hallowed eldest sister, none of the remaining siblings so much as dated in adulthood. Harold was a

trained botanist and had studied agricultural science at college in San Jose. Before lunch he showed us menfolk his orchards and experiments at hybriding different types of apples and cultivating seedless oranges. Ruth and Rosamund worked as librarians in town, while Marion was the self-proclaimed homebody in charge of cooking, sewing and gardening. When Aunt Doreen and Uncle Art arrived, we sat down at a huge table laden with a delicious lunch. Deviled eggs were a favorite of mine and there was an inviting plate of them within easy reach.

As weird as these new-found cousins first seemed to Brian and me, they were actually quite entertaining company. After lunch, Barbara helped Marion with the dishes while the other grown-ups relocated to the parlor to reminisce. It was here that I learned how we were all related. The dominant link was a figure staring down at me sternly from his full-sized portrait taking up much of the parlor wall. The Whitehills spoke of Marjorie, Russell and Gertrude as if they had just parted company an hour before. Naturally, they had photo albums of their own. Rosamund fetched them and patiently went through one after another with me until I had an overview of how big this tribe was. Brian was getting bored with all this adult stuff; he had drawn the short straw with this visit. Entire walls were lined with books, but there was no sign of a radio or television or even a telephone. When he meekly asked if they knew about these modern inventions, Ruth guffawed and led the adults into a hearty round of laughter.

"Of course, we know about them", she said, "but we aren't interested in what they broadcast. All the entertainment and information we require can be found in books."

At this juncture, she got up to look for a picture book for Brian while chatty Rosamund kept the conversation alive.

In the early evening we left the Whitehills' congenial company for home and a return to 1961. The next time we visited with them

they had been forced to move into the modern age. The State of California bought up their land for a new highway development linking San Francisco to Los Angeles. When the contractors found a considerable stretch of paved road on the property linking it to the El Camino Real of the Californian missionary period, they doubled their already generous offer. Ruth and Rosamund retired from the library and the nuclear family settled into a brand new and luxurious four-bedroom home in the Los Gatos hills with direct access to a natural brook and woods in their boundless backyard. Brian now had a field day of wilderness adventures to live out during our future yearly get-togethers, while I read poetry and essays from school projects to the assembled adults.

By the time I had turned nine, school life took a sour turn. Competitive group sports were a curse and a gang of tough kids started heckling me every chance they had. To add insult to injury, I was diagnosed as myopic and needed to wear glasses to correct my acute short-sightedness. My eyewear did not give me a valid excuse from P.E, alas. And these tough kids apparently hadn't heard of the adage "One doesn't hit people who wear glasses". They not only hit, but teased and ridiculed. This news got back to my parents at one of the P.T.A. meetings Mom assiduously attended. The very next evening at dinner I was being scolded for not defending myself. Having no instinctive knowledge of what to do, Dad stood me up on a stool in front of his punching bag in the garage and showed me how to hit it. Having little rhythm and less coordination I soon failed this test. The bag kept bouncing back into my face, sending my glasses flying. A week later I found myself registered for ju-jitsu evening courses with Brian tagging along out of solidarity. At nine, I also fell into the despised boy's clothing category called *husky*, so my parents thought it was time I burned off some fat and got into shape. I had no idea what I was letting myself in for.

We went to class three evenings a week, diligently working our way up the ladder from white to yellow belts. I didn't mind the strict Japanese discipline so much. It was new and curious, and the sensei was soft-spoken and fair. As a modicum of proficiency in the sport developed, I gained some self-confidence I had hitherto been lacking. Brian took to it as he did to all sports, with agility and grace. Towards the end of the school year, the punks' head honcho picked a fight with me after class one day. Brian came along in the crowd to hold my glasses while I threw and pinned the kid so fast he didn't have time to catch his breath. Following the precepts of the sport, I didn't want to hurt him; embarrassment in front of his pals would be painful enough. And revenge was sweet! The year ended on a high note and the punks steered clear of me from then on. With this goal accomplished, I gave up on jujitsu at the start of summer vacation. I couldn't tell anyone why, but the stiff fabric, funky smell of the *gi* and physical contact with older boys gave me erections I could only poorly hide from the eyes of observant parents.

As a special treat that summer Mom had made arrangements for us to visit her relatives in Denver. She corresponded with her cousins and got the rest of the family news from aunts Carol and Teresa, who communicated with their counterparts by phone. I poured over the atlas looking for Indian reservations along the way, trying to imagine how long we would need to cover the distance by car. It was a third of the way across the country!

In retrospect, the journey had few highlights. The breadth of Nevada was one vast wasteland of sagebrush, desert and distant peaks. The terrain didn't change much when we crossed into Utah, either. Only as we neared Salt Lake City were there signs of habitation and civilization. We broke the trip in the Mormon capital to sightsee at the famous tabernacle and stroll along the lake. The second leg brought us into the Rocky Mountains, with lush green pastures and traces of snow even in early July. As we drew nearer to

our destination, Mom's excitement grew. She began to tell us about her childhood there, all the cousins we would meet, who owned and operated the best pizza parlor in Boulder. In order not to intrude on our hosts late at night, we stopped at a motel on the lower slopes of the Eastern Rockies, from which we had a glittering view of Denver in the distance.

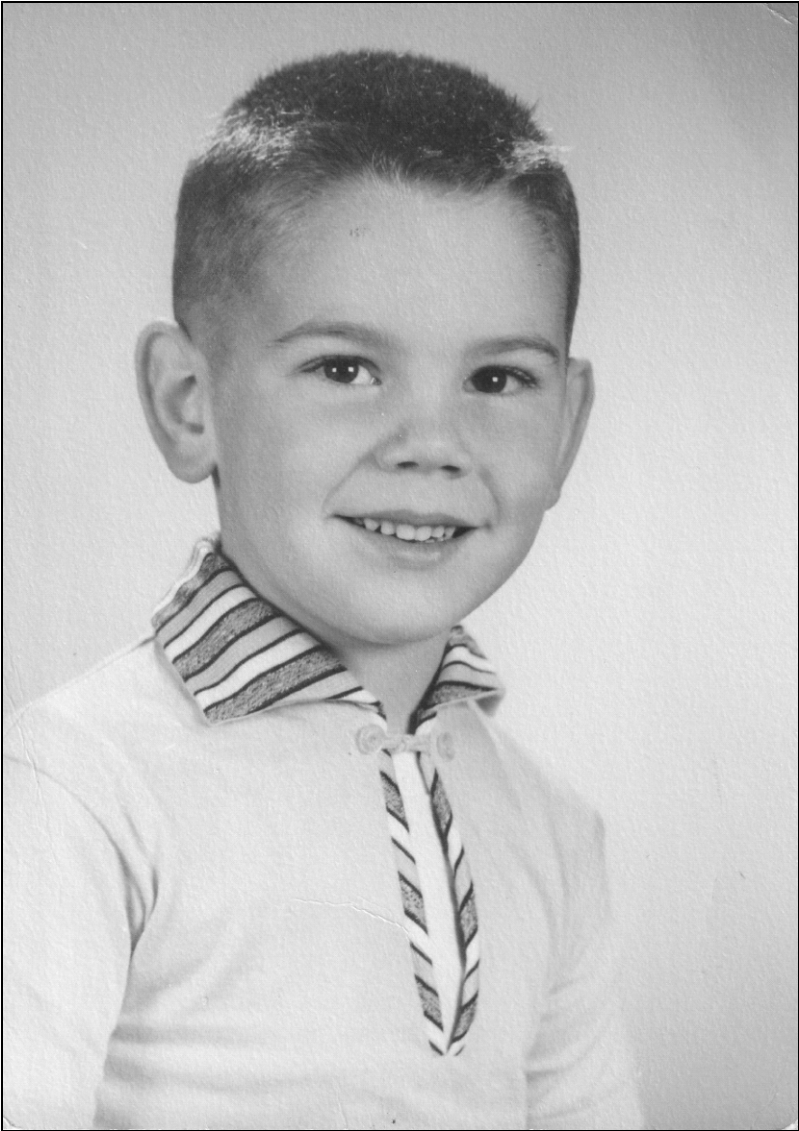
Making our way through the city was child's play for Mom. She hadn't been there in twenty-five years, yet she had a great sense of orientation. We drove up to Cousin Myron's house as if we did so every weekend. Brian and I were bowled over by the amount of kids in this family. Myron and Mary had seven; Mom's other cousins had at least three and they were more or less all our age. There were so many of us that we could form full-numbered teams to play touch football on the lawn and never weary of rounds of hide-and-seek. This kind of group sport was fun, since we were all family and there was no animosity from external neighborhood kids fighting for our Dad's attention. Besides, a full program had been planned for our stay, and for those who tired of group games, there was a pianola and billiard table in the basement. The older cousins taught Brian and me how to play pool while the upright piano played itself. Picnics in the back yard were huge affairs, catered with wonderful pizzas and countless watermelons. To prove to us that we were in the True West, Myron organized a trip to Red Rock, William F. Cody's museum and final resting place, in the nearby mountains. Other days we met people we had only heard about and made a side trip to Louisville to see Great-grandpa Eusebio's saloon. And, we even saw real Indians, although they were posing for tourists in full war bonnets in front of a small-scale tepee at a gas station. This was an ideal kid's vacation. Brian and I talked about it all the way back to California and for most of the summer. Barbara and Gil enjoyed it just as much. For Mom, it was a long awaited reunion. Dad was

automatically accepted by the extensive clan and felt he belonged again.

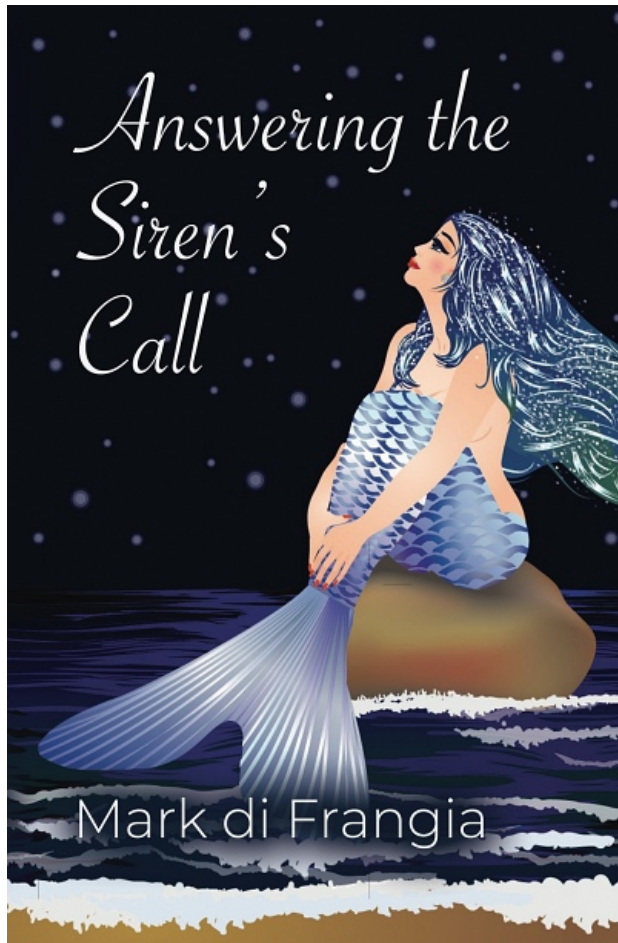
I was so taken by our Western adventure that I built a tepee in the backyard and took to sleeping in it on hot summer nights. But mine was much bigger than that pitiful display at the gas station. Chrissy's dad cut off as much long-stemmed bamboo as I needed for tent poles, and could carry from his backyard to mine. "It would save him cutting it back in the Fall," Mr Marchini said with a smile. He was such a nice man, and gorgeous to boot. I envied Chrissy the luck of being able to curl up in his warm embrace.

Mom donated three old chenille bedspreads and a box of large safety pins to the project. The rest I figured out for myself. Now, if I wasn't sticking my nose in a book in my bedroom or doing yard work, I could be found doing beadwork or braiding belts on a small loom in my tepee. Dad even granted me a small parcel of sunny yard space to plant a few rows of corn. Mail order catalogues provided me with moccasins and a deerskin outfit. This cost me most of my Christmas savings but it was worth it. Besides, I had something authentic to wear at Halloween! Climbing trees and walking along backyard fences held little appeal compared to the solace I found, alone in my tepee.

Mark di Frangia



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