

**TRISTAN
TAORMINO**



**A PART OF
THE HEART
CAN'T BE
EATEN**

A MEMOIR

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A MEMOIR

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The events and dialogue are portrayed to the best of the author's memory.

Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of the people involved.

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FOR QUEER PEOPLE EVERYWHERE

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To my dad, Bill Taormino: this story is ours, and I hope I have honored you with it. I miss you every day.

CONCEIVED

I was conceived in a moment of queer love and confusion. At least that's how I imagine it—obviously, I wasn't there.

My mother was born in 1940 and raised in Oyster Bay, on Long Island, New York, where she was the only girl in her class until sixth grade. She did everything the boys did, including playing on the basketball team. By high school, she was known only as the younger sister of her brother, whom some teachers believed was a genius. Her classmates voted her the wittiest. It wasn't until she got to college that anyone told her she was really smart.

When my father graduated high school in 1961, he joined the army. No one knew when the Vietnam War might end, and the possibility of combat terrified him, but anything was better than sticking close to home with his big Italian family. He liked playing Superman with his cousins at the beach in Coney Island, and he loved TV and movie stars, but his childhood was more profoundly marked by his mother's bouts of mania and depression. Her episodes were punctuated by violence and threats: *You better lie to this ER doctor about how your arm got broken. I'll send you to the home for bad boys and leave you there forever.* He needed a way to pay for college, and his family said the army would make him a man, which was both appealing and repulsive to him for different reasons. Being straight, in every sense of the word, was drilled into him by slaps of the ruler at the hands of the Catholic school nuns and the never-ending onslaught of homophobic jokes from his relatives. So off he went to basic training at Fort Dix.



Figure 1.1 Dad (left) and another soldier in the army, Okinawa, Japan, circa 1962

When he got back to the States in 1964, he enrolled at Suffolk County Community College on Long Island. The first time he saw my mom, she was wearing stylish Italian shoes and a chartreuse wool tweed coat as she got out of her MG convertible, where the ashtray overflowed with fuchsia-ringed cigarette butts. At twenty-four, she had spent the summer in Europe and was returning to campus for her second year as an English professor. She saw him onstage in a school play and was intrigued. They went to a concert together and bonded over their love of a then mostly unknown Dionne Warwick. Shortly after, they started dating and fell in love. An older, stuffy male colleague of hers said about their relationship, “Well, you two certainly have moxie.”

After the community college, she got a job at Long Island University’s C.W. Post campus, and my dad enrolled there. He graduated, and she taught there for one more year. My mother, whose mind is sharp at eighty-two, told me, “I can’t prove it, but I think my contract wasn’t renewed because he was such

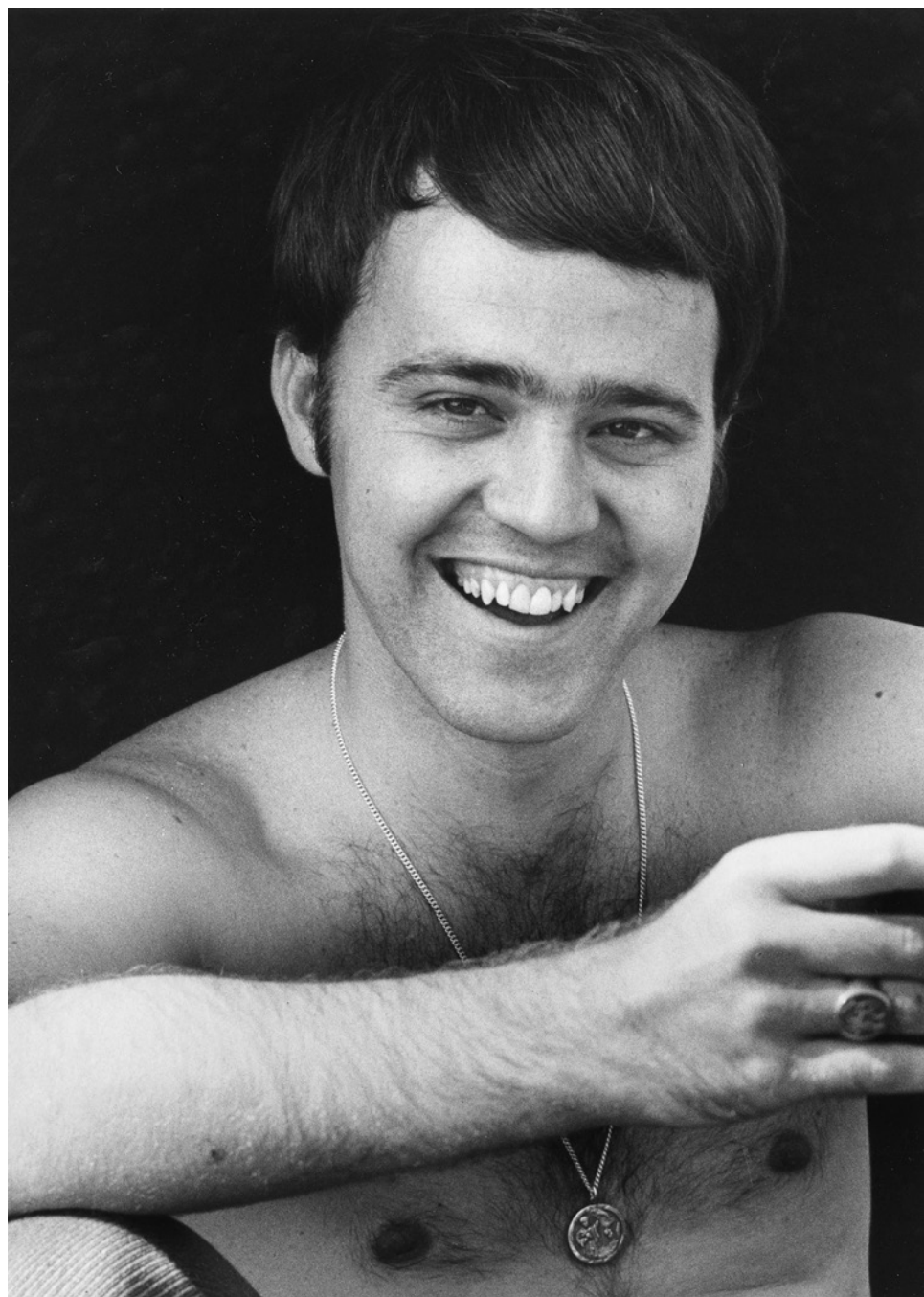


Figure 1.2 Dad's acting head shot, Brooklyn, New York, 1968

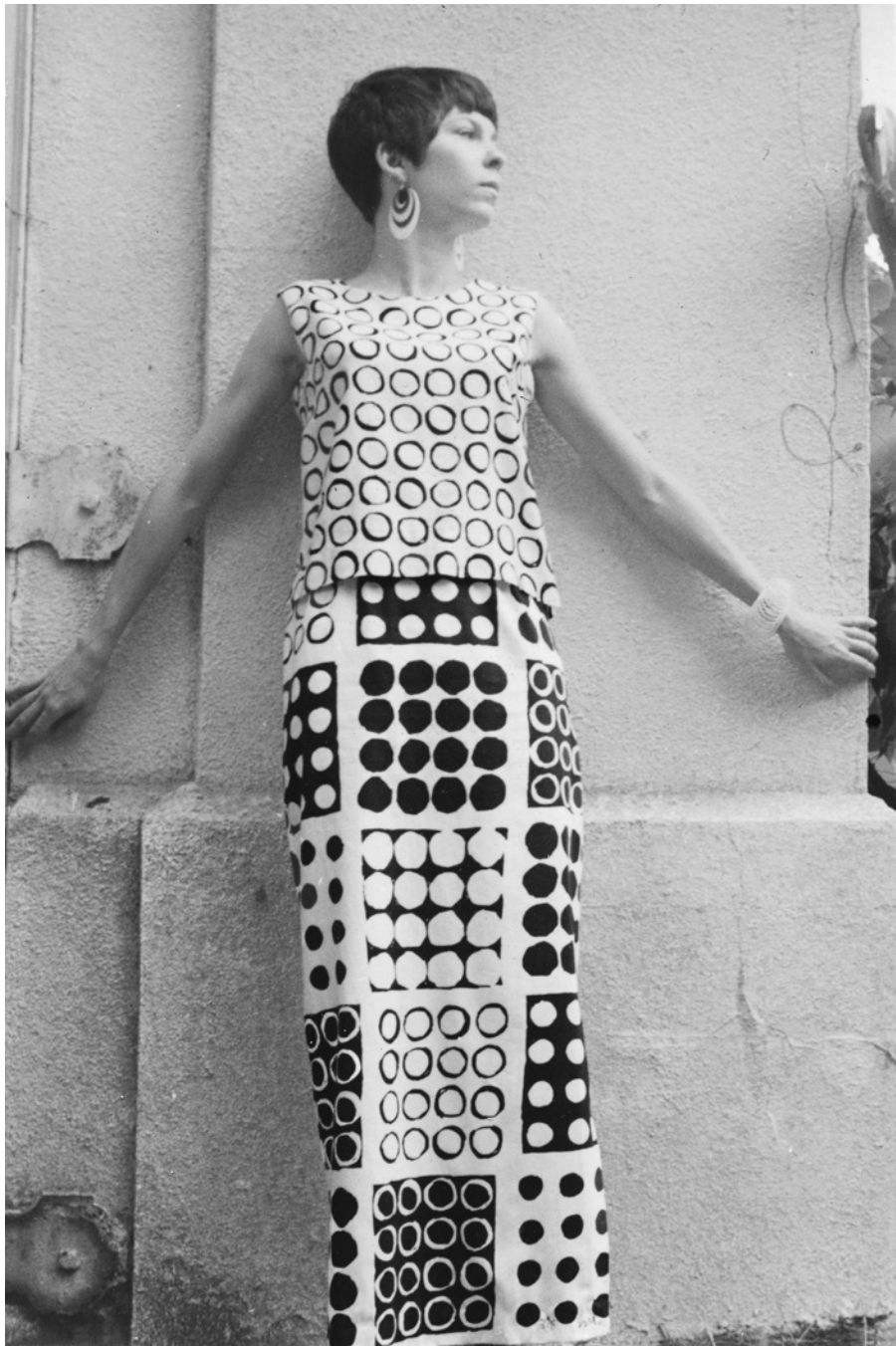


Figure 1.3 Mom, Long Island, New York, circa 1969

a troublemaker in the drama department.” He aspired to be an actor. He was born a troublemaker.

I have a single photo from their wedding day, twenty months after they met, taken at her parents’ house in the backyard among my grandfather’s prized rosebushes. She looks fashionable in a white column dress with her nearly black hair cut in a short pixie style framing her thin face. Standing next to her in a dark suit and tie, my father is handsome, with thick dark brown hair and intense eyes. They both look stunned. Not caught off guard that someone had taken their picture at that exact moment; no, more like serious and slightly confused. There are no smiles. But someone preserved the photo along with a photo of my grandparents from that day; they sit opposite each other in a gold-edged double frame with a hinge between them. Decades later, my aunt gave me a copy of their wedding album which featured a similar photo from the Catholic church where they were married.

While my mom was pregnant, ultrasound to determine the sex of the baby wasn’t yet widely available, but it didn’t matter because my parents wanted to decide on my name before I was born, regardless of whether M or F would be checked on my birth certificate. Instead of poring over baby name books, they created a contest for their friends and family, which they called “Name the Little Creature,” complete with a mimeographed flyer. Typed on the page, among scattered baby clip art, are the guidelines:

You can pick only one *multi-purpose-unisex* name. Prizes will be awarded for originality, bizarreness, and in some cases a refreshing tackiness. Winners could receive two weeks with the creature, a Tony Perkins album, a collared peccary, or 3/8 of a bushel of garlic salt.

No names from the contest spoke to them, and they instead decided on Tristan, the tragic hero in *Tristan and Isolde*. Best known as a Richard Wagner opera, *Tristan and Isolde* is a story that dates back to the twelfth century that has been retold in many different versions and languages and references King Arthur mythology. The gist is that Tristan, a knight, is tasked with going to fetch Isolde and bring her back to marry King Mark of Cornwall. Tristan and Isolde drink a potion that causes them to fall madly in love (Was it intentional? Was it an accident?). Isolde ultimately marries Mark, who loves Tristan like a son, but she and Tristan carry on an affair. There are several versions of what happens once King Mark finds out: they escape but are caught; or he sentences them to death for adultery (hanging for him, burning at the stake for her); or Tristan leaves the kingdom so Isolde and the king can be together.



Figure 1.4 Mom and Dad's wedding, Oyster Bay, New York, 1966



Figure 1.5
Huntington
Station,
New York,
1971

My mother tells the story of my birth on Mother's Day in 1971. She had taken Lamaze classes, learned the breathing, and decided beforehand she didn't want any drugs. She labored for a long time, all night, until she finally gave up and said, "Give. Me. The. Fucking. Epidural." Then she pushed and pushed and had a clear vision: I was coming out of her, head first, with my arms folded against my chest and my eyes wide open. I was holding a sword. She said it must have been the drugs.

In 1972 they decided to flee Long Island so they would have more distance from their parents and so Dad could get his master's in film. We moved to a rural town thirty miles north of Hanover, New Hampshire, and lived in a church they bought with a mortgage from the Veterans Affairs (VA) home loan program. It was a tall brick building with big windows and a wooden steeple painted white. A hand-painted sign still hangs under the window at the top of the entrance to the building. There is an ornate filigree in the middle, and black lettering that reads:

1837 Meeting House. 1859 Abandoned.

1875 Village Hall. 1968 Dwelling.

When my parents moved in, it had already been converted to a living space. They were hippies and thought it was cool. *Look at us, we live in an old, broken-down church!* Heavy doors in the vestibule opened into one big space with a stage at the back of the room—the original pulpit. Stage left were the kitchen, a bedroom, and a very DIY bathroom. A wooden staircase led to a small loft. There was a narrow balcony opposite the stage that ran the entire width of the building, where I'm told I spent hours running back and forth. The whole living situation was deeply ironic since both my parents were raised Catholic but had consciously rejected and abandoned the religion. They found it entirely too dogmatic. To them, Catholicism crushed souls, it didn't save them. They didn't baptize me or raise me with any religion. So when people ask me about the first time I went to church, I tell them I lived in a church. In North Haverhill, off the main road, with a big field behind it.

Figure 1.6 Roslyn, New York, 1974



In 2015, en route to a queer wedding between two dear friends, I made an uncharacteristically spontaneous detour. I saw Haverhill on a sign on the highway and urged my partner to exit. I called my mom, and she guided us to the place from memory. I found the imposing brick building standing majestically among tall grass that hadn't been mowed for months. It looked the same as the photos I'd seen. I got out of the car and walked up to the front door; when I turned the knob, it opened to the vestibule. I ventured inside to see that it had once again been abandoned. It had been used as a dance school, and much of its recent past—posters of ballerinas, tiny pointe shoes, dusty tutus—had been left behind. It was a little spooky, like I could be walking into a Stephen King novel. I looked around, climbed the stairs to the balcony, took some photos. I wanted to feel some connection to the place, a body memory, but I didn't. So I went on Zillow, which listed its value at a little over \$100,000. It recently sold for \$27,000. Probably at auction.

Before my second birthday, my dad announced to my mom that he was moving out. He didn't tell her he was gay, but she overheard him telling his mom on the phone. He moved in with his lover, a local priest. A church was apparently also the best place to find single gay men in New Hampshire. When he took off, she became a single mom in the middle of nowhere with a toddler and no job (they'd been living off his student loans). He told her she could have the church, but that meant monthly mortgage payments she couldn't afford. She decided to go back to Long Island, the place and the people they had initially fled. 1973, abandoned. Before we moved, she baked pies and sold them from the front yard to support us. She still makes her apple pie at holidays; it's got a cinnamon crumb topping that could bring you to your knees.

My dad never put on a tutu like some budding gay boys, but when he was growing up, there were other signs that he might be queer. He had his first male lover when he was stationed in Okinawa: a marine whom he was deeply ambivalent about, in his own words. He knew his desire, but he fed it reluctantly. I had always assumed he kept this secret from my mom. Many years later, when I was home on winter break from college, we were at the new apartment she moved into when I graduated high school. I sat longways on the couch that had followed us from place to place, which she had reupholstered for the fifth time. The new fabric was a flamboyant jewel-toned flower print. She was in the kitchen baking Christmas cookies.

"Did you ever suspect that Dad was gay before you got married?"

"Well, he told me he was bisexual."

"Really?" I hadn't expected that.

“It wasn’t at all surprising to me,” she said, being very casual, and followed that up with: “It was the late sixties, wasn’t *everyone* a little bit bisexual?”

It was amazing my dad could say that much out loud since the homophobia in his family was not subtle or unspoken; every day was a new opportunity to shame a man with feminine traits or use the word *fag* to eviscerate someone. *Do you know why queers all have mustaches and goatees? To make their mouths look like pussies!* I believe he married my mother in a complex web of emotions: certainly there was love, a want for a partner, but marrying her was also a way for him to hide from his desire for men. Marriage *was* a good cover story.

As I write this memoir, I am living through the second pandemic in my lifetime, the one after AIDS, a word that stings like a fresh wound. Most of my work as a sex educator is on hold, so I have something that ordinarily eludes me: time. I call my psychiatrist, and he ups my meds. I bake lemon bars, binge *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, and read the books of authors I will interview in the next weeks for my podcast: *The Not Wives*, *The Ultimate Guide to Seduction and Foreplay*, *Female Husbands*, *Crossfire* by the poet Staceyann Chin. I update the PowerPoint graphics for my polyamory workshops, catalog photos and letters from old lovers, organize my copies of *On Our Backs* magazines, rearrange the cabinet that holds my Feminist Porn Awards. And I decide, finally, to read my dad’s memoir, which is dedicated to me. As I am writing my own story, I am delving into his. Printed on a dot matrix printer, the title, “Lies and Circumstance,” is still remarkably dark on the page after all these years. I stare at the typewriter font as I type the manuscript into Word on my MacBook Air, and I hear his voice, low but animated, whispering to me. It brings me comfort and renewed grief.

I have had this manuscript, which was never published, since he gave it to me in 1991, but I never read it all the way through until now. There are so many reasons why, and probably more I have yet to uncover. I miss him too much. I might find answers in these pages to questions I never had or solve mysteries I didn’t know existed. It’s scary to read about his troubled childhood, his complicated desire, his transgressions, in black and white. Fearing the nuns at school would catch him with another boy. Watching his hypermasculine cousin Bubby shave his face in the nude. Ducking when his mother hurled a frying pan at him for talking back to her. Losing his virginity to an Okinawan sex worker. Leaving his family and never looking back. What’s written into

his DNA, my DNA, emerges in stark details. It's disconcerting to see a line that connects his trauma and mine. The story ends in 1973, so it doesn't contain any of the closeness and joy we shared. It's painful to be with him through only words and memories. I should be thankful that he left behind this archive. It is my inheritance, the story of my life before me.

MRS. C.'S

From 1973 to 1976, I went to Mrs. C.'s house every day with five or six other kids whose moms worked. Mrs. C. was a kind, round woman with a bowl haircut who wore colorful hand-knit shawls. She had a daughter named Valentine who was born on Valentine's Day, but everyone called her Val. Val had the kind of short haircut where you could see through her hair on the sides, and she often wore jeans with a chain attached to the wallet in her back pocket, a T-shirt, and a leather jacket. Like a uniform. She worked at a mechanic's fixing cars, but her real passion was boxing. I had never before seen such a handsome, strong woman. She looked like she could handle herself in any situation, including beating someone up if necessary (to defend her honor or maybe mine).

I had my own tiny room in the front of the house for nap time, with a twin bed and yellow-flowered bedspread. I was a naturally high-strung five-year-old, so it was hard for me to fall asleep on command; I usually just lay there, restless. One day, I began moving my right hand between my legs, and it felt really good, so I kept doing it. I'd explored touching myself before, but this time I was more deliberate; I rubbed my vulva through my underwear and could feel myself getting excited. I flipped over on my stomach and kept rubbing, now putting my left hand over my right hand to apply more pressure. My body started to tense up, almost like a cramp, and there was an explosion inside me, like an electrical current coursing through my entire body, like my

skin could start a fire. The feeling washed over me. Afterward, I was breathing quickly, like I had run around a park for hours, and I was exhausted. I drifted off to sleep easily. When I woke up, I heard rustling in the hallway because the other kids were awake and doing stuff. My young brain thought I had found a secret weapon: I could put myself to sleep whenever I wanted. Or maybe I was the secret weapon, like the Bionic Woman. Certainly that would come in handy in the future?

There were two boys my age I liked at Mrs. C.'s: Brian and Nicky. Brian was a poised and confident boy; my mom called him "alarmingly sure of himself." He had wavy blond hair and was clean and neat. It seemed like he didn't have a ton of time for anyone, so when you got his attention, you were lucky and basked in the glow of his strong five-year-old ego. Kissing him felt exciting and made me tingle all over. I knew in my tiny heart that Brian was out of my league; thus, it was really cool that he picked *me* to kiss.

Nicky had a mop of dirty, sometimes greasy, blond hair cut in the style of The Monkeys. He had the kind of body you might call *string bean*. His go-to outfit was a maroon turtleneck sweater over goldenrod bell-bottom corduroys. He had beady brown eyes that made him look like a mouse. Nicky was a free-spirit hippie kid who never had a care in the world. Once I saw tears stream from his eyes when he hurt his hand, and it was clear he wasn't embarrassed to be crying in front of grown-ups and other kids. (I was sure Brian could have an arm broken in six places, and he'd never shed a tear.)

When I learned to read, my mom got me a copy of *The Little Mermaid* by Hans Christian Andersen, which came with a cassette of someone reading the story, which I listened to again and again on a tape recorder. When the witch took away the mermaid's voice in exchange for giving her legs so she could be among humans, she warned her that each step would feel like she'd been cut in two. I imagined the pain like shards of glass deeply embedding themselves in her feet. I could picture it, I could feel it. The mermaid pined for a prince, who fell in love with another, but the witch had told her that if that happened, it would seal her fate. She died. Everything had its price. It was a model of love, and it was pretty bleak.

One night, Nicky and I were sleeping over at Mrs. C.'s, and we plotted to find each other after everyone went to bed. I took the risk of cracking my door open, trying not to wake up the dog. I tiptoed across the hall to the den. I crawled inside his sleeping bag on the floor, and we giggled softly. I put my index finger on his lips to say, *Don't make noise*. His body was warm against



Figure 2.1 Brooklyn Aquarium, Brooklyn, New York, 1976

mine as we kissed. He tasted like Tater Tots and ketchup, sweet tomatoey breath. I thought it was weird to taste the inside of someone else's mouth. We'd had hot dogs for dinner, but that was hours ago, so I wasn't sure why ketchup lingered on his tongue. I liked Nicky, we fit together nicely, but I was sure he wasn't my one and only because I would never put ketchup on a hot dog.

ARTICHOKE HEARTS

My mother comes from a long line of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants and Catholics, the Bennetts and the Pynchons, and they go *way* back. My grandfather's side of the family are some of the original colonizers who arrived in America from England in the early 1600s; I call them the *Mayflower fuckers*. I am a direct descendant of William Pynchon, considered the founder of Springfield, Massachusetts, after he "bought" the land in 1636 from the Pocomtuc tribe to create a trading post on the Agawam and Connecticut Rivers. Pynchon's son founded several other towns in western Massachusetts and Trinity College. I imagined they owned slaves and burned witches at the stake, but there are no records of that. I *am* a Daughter of the Revolution, just not that one.

William Pynchon's claim to fame was authoring *The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption*, the first book ever banned in the New World and burned in Boston Common. Considered a theological layman, Pynchon dared to interpret the Bible differently than the New England clergy, arguing one could earn God's grace rather than have the fate of your soul be predestined. He wanted people to work for it. Charged with heresy, he fled back to the Old World before his trial and never returned.

His descendant, my grandfather Thomas Ruggles Pynchon, was orphaned at the age of three and raised by a series of relatives. He settled in Oyster Bay on Long Island, where my mom and her brothers were raised, and he was a local Republican politician for a while, appointed the superintendent of

highways, then town supervisor. He was well liked and sincere; he loved golf and his rosebushes, and all of us called him Poppie. My grandmother, Katherine, was raised upstate in Frankfurt, New York, also by relatives, because her mother died in childbirth when she was three. What a thing to have in common. Katherine became a nurse in 1926 when it was a big deal for women to get a higher education and work outside the home. She referred to her own grandmother, one of the women who raised her, as a *battle-ax*. Both my grandparents stayed on-brand: they were very stoic, stiff-upper-lip kind of people. Sometimes my grandmother was sharp-tongued, caustic, mean even, especially when she drank too much. On holidays, which is mostly when I saw her, she'd often blurt out whatever was on her mind. My mom's favorite story to tell is that her mother often repeated with a certain resignation, "I always wanted three sons." (My mother is her only daughter.)

My mom is a strong woman despite having delicate hands and exceptionally tiny wrists. She could lift heavy things and paint an entire room by herself. I watched her as she dressed up for meetings in a stylish poppy-colored suit with shoulder pads and a silk shell underneath. Her dark hair followed what was fashionable at the time—a pixie cut, a perm like Cher's, a mom bob once her hair went fully gray in her forties. She styled it and wore makeup every day, but she never adopted the 1980s glamour of Linda Evans or Joan Collins. She didn't successfully blend in with the other moms in a way I wanted her to. She never dated like other divorcées. *Does she no longer believe in love?*

I asked her, "Why doesn't Dad give us any money, like kids in other divorced families?"

She replied, "I don't need a man to support me. I am a *feminist*." She didn't mention that he didn't have any money to give.

Unlike every other adult woman I knew, my mother never wore a bra, and I found that embarrassing. Especially if she wore a thin turtleneck, and you could see her nipples obviously visible through it. Fem-uh-niz-um. To me, it had something to do with being single, broke, and braless.

In the summer before I began first grade, we moved to a house on Cherry Avenue in West Sayville. Sayville was a sleepy little town in Suffolk County on the South Shore of Long Island, considered "far out east" since it was much less densely populated than other parts of the island. The fact was, the further east you went, the cheaper things got; keep going on the Long Island Expressway, and you would hit farmland waiting to be transformed into housing developments, condo complexes, and strip malls. Sayville had a quaint, movie-set Main Street with a pizza parlor, a ladies' lingerie shop,



Figure 3.1 Mom at my grandparents' house, East Norwich, New York, 1977

Greaves Stationary, Fritzsche's Bakery, plus a movie theater, a public library, and a Friendly's restaurant. Past Friendly's, under the overpass, the town sprawled into housing developments.

West Sayville was the part of town with a mini strip mall, a funeral home, and one short block of weathered shops—less fancy than Sayville. It was best known for its high-end restaurant, the Lake House; its golf course; and LaSalle Military Academy, a school for boys from rich families in need of discipline. The West Sayville Fire Department was housed in a picture-book brick building at the end of our block, where Cherry Avenue dead-ended into Main Street. It was staffed by volunteers, so when there was a fire, we heard the loud wailing of the sirens in every room of the house.

Our two cats moved with us: one was a neurotic calico named Splash with big circles of rust and black on her white fur, whom my mother had found crouched under a car in the rain one day, malnourished and frightened. Splash could be moody and scratched me badly several times, but I loved her like she was my baby. Friday, named for the day he came to live with us, was Splash's foil: an affectionate, laid-back boy we got from a friend's litter; he was snowy white except for a circle of gray on the middle of his head, another one on his back, and a gray tail.



Figure 3.2 In Wonder Woman costume made by Mom, West Sayville, New York, 1977

As soon as we moved into the two-story Cherry Avenue house, my mom started to fix it up; she wallpapered my bedroom with a lavender flower print and set up a home office with her own desk and typewriter. After being in what seemed like other people's spaces, I thought this house might be *ours*. We lived on the first floor in one apartment and rented out the upstairs and the back unit. On one side of our chain-link fence was a huge corner property with an actual mansion with black shutters and two chimneys. People said George Washington stopped by to rest there in 1790 on his way to somewhere else. Maybe we'd stay a while in our place?

Sayville was 99 percent white and Christian. It was hard starting a new school, especially when it was clear that everyone knew each other from kindergarten. On the first day, I didn't have much of a plan to make new friends, but I noticed that I was wearing the same shoes as another girl: a