

I Married
Mr. America



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Lindy Tefft, MS



EMPOWER PRESS

Special thanks to Candice Kramer, John Reinhardt, Jeffrey Ringer, and Carl Bozeman. Much appreciation to Greg Tefft for being supportive in my efforts to tell my story.

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EMPOWER PRESS

Laguna Hills, CA 92653
www.empower-press.com

ISBN: 978-0-9857080-0-9
LCCN: 2012937564

Cover designed by Jennet Inglis
Cover photo by Roman Salicki
Text design and composition by John Reinhardt Book Design

Printed in the United States of America

This is a true story. Names of certain individuals
have been changed to protect their privacy.

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Author's Note

This story is based on pure fact and truth. It is a step by step, brutally honest account of my life. With no rest in between experiences, and barely enough time to take a breath, my life was like a never-ending roller coaster ride. These are my memoirs, my story, and exactly how it happened.

1

A Lost Identity

Early Childhood

Having been born a couple of weeks early, I barely weighed five pounds. My grandmother used to say that I was the size of a baby chicken that could barely fit into the palm of her hand. I was born with an eye condition that left me severely far-sighted. When I became tired, one of my eyes would cross in; it was diagnosed as a “lazy eye.” The medical doctors told my parents that my eyesight would progressively worsen causing possible blindness by the age of thirty. This dismal diagnosis was extremely frightening and always echoed in my mind. My parents sponsored many years of remedial eye exercises for which I was very grateful, but there was not much improvement, and I felt like a huge disappointment to them. On top of my eye condition, my father desperately wanted a son since my sister had already been born. I always felt very badly that I couldn’t live up to his expectations and the mere sight of me seemed to be an aggravation to him. I guess that’s why my dad constantly yelled as he just wouldn’t speak to me in a normal tone. When I asked my mother about his yelling, she would say, “He doesn’t mean anything by his harshness. He really loves you, so look behind his words and his manner.” But, I couldn’t ignore the fact that he continuously raised his voice when addressing me. All I ever really wanted to do was to please him.

My grandparents, on both sides, came through Ellis Island on their migration from Russia in the early 1900s, which made my parents first-generation Americans. My mother told us that when my father was born, his parents were extremely disappointed because they really wanted a girl. She also mentioned that they had clothed him in dresses for the first couple of years of his life. Later on, I learned that this story was a complete lie. To this day, I could never understand Mother’s reason for telling us this ridiculous story.

I didn’t really know my grandparents on my father’s side as I had met them only once; they died when I was very young. My mother’s parents lived near us and I loved them dearly. My grandmother used to call me “Lindy America.” Perhaps she thought that I was different from the rest of the family and considered me to be someone special. Since my grandparents didn’t speak English very well, Mother told me that when she went to elementary school, she made up names for words that they were not able to teach her. The other kids made fun of her language skills. This embarrassment registered so heavily in her mind, that as an adult, she always made it a point to speak perfect English, pronouncing each word flawlessly. Because of her speech sensitivity, my pronunciation and use of the English language were always under constant, heavy scrutiny. My choice of words, as well as their pronunciation, had to be perfect. God forbid if I mispronounced a word as all hell would break loose!

My mother told me that when she was a child, her father accidentally spilled a pot of boiling water

on her causing scoliosis of her spine. Many years later, I found out that this was not at all what had happened. A distant cousin that I had found in Florida informed me that, as a little girl, my mother was curious about a pot she saw on the bathroom shelf. It contained hot water and when she reached up to grab it, the water spilled leaving her badly burned; my grandfather was not even in the room when this happened. She had severe burns on one side of her body and was very self-conscious about these burn scars. Subsequently, Mother always wore long sleeves to hide them. I often wondered if her desire for perfect speech, and shyness regarding her scars, could have contributed to my mother's paranoiac fearfulness as well as her need for absolute control of everything as time went on. I have many unanswered questions. Why would she lie, blaming this burn incident on my grandfather; this is something that I will never know. Interestingly, my mother kept my sister and me away from our relatives, so I wasn't able to obtain information that could have reduced my confusion about so many things. In her strange, over-protective and controlling ways, Mother told us all kinds of weird stories about our relatives. Resultantly, we very rarely had contact with our distant family. My mother acted very jealous of her older sister who was very beautiful and quite successful. My aunt, a corporate attorney who lived in the wealthy Hamptons in New York, graduated from college by the approximate age of eighteen. Mother's jealousy of her sister always baffled me because she was also a physically beautiful woman with a strong degree of intelligence.

I didn't have many early childhood memories for reasons that were not clear until later in life. Somehow, when things are exceedingly painful, your body and soul have a way of protecting you by blocking them out. But, these hidden memories and emotions catch up with you later if they are not handled properly. Through the years, many stressful circumstances forced me to go into emotional release therapy which cleared the way to retrieve many buried childhood memories. I also endured years and years of horrible dreams and night sweats until I was finally able to put the pieces together. One such difficult experience happened when I was about five years old. I walked into my mother's room where she proceeded to throw me down onto her bed. Then, she sat on top of me pinning my arms down by my sides. I had no idea what happened after that or what prompted this type of behavior. It took many painful years to finally dig out the memories of sexual molestation, also recalling times when as baby, Mother used me like an experimental object inserting pencils and other weird things into my vagina. As I got a little older, she further experimented by reading to me at night while I was sleeping. One night, when I woke up to the sound of her voice and asked her what she was doing, she said, "This is an experiment, just go back to sleep."

Suffering constantly from a lot of high fever sicknesses, especially tonsillitis, my mother worked diligently to nurse me back to health. This was confusing as she would flip from "nurture to nasty" at a moment's notice where all of a sudden, she would drag me down the hallway by my hair. I never knew what I did to deserve that harsh type of treatment. Not knowing what she would do at any given moment, I continually lived in a state of sheer terror, feeling completely unsafe.

Born in Pasadena, California, in the Huntington Memorial Hospital, I was my parent's second child with my sister being born a year and a month earlier. At that time, we lived on a ranch in Arcadia. Shortly after that, we moved to Whittier, then onto the top floor of a duplex in West Hollywood. That residence seemed like a large tree house with Plummer Park as our backyard. A French family lived downstairs with three kids, and our landlord lived in the house in the front with their two kids. Next door, they had one child, and two doors down was a family of midgets with one average-sized daughter and one midget son. Their father became a successful midget actor with roles in numerous movies. The kids in our neighborhood got along and there was always someone to play with.

Plummer Park provided the type of backyard a kid could only dream about; there was so much to do. You could climb the many trees or pick blackberries, avoiding the occasional attacks from blue jays that were possessive over the trees. There were arts and crafts, the junior symphony orchestra, plays, tetherball, basketball; you name it, and it was there. The older folks sat on the park benches

talking and playing card games from dusk until dawn. Occasionally, one of these old folks died on the spot while playing cards and their bodies had to be hauled away by a mortician.

At very young ages, both my sister and I took modern dance classes along with music lessons. I remember being in one dance class that had children and adults, and included actresses like Lucille Ball. After five lessons on the bass violin, at the age of twelve, I was very proud that I made it into a Los Angeles Junior Symphony Orchestra. Carrying such a heavy instrument that was taller than me back and forth from our home to the auditorium was always a challenge. My bass lessons were grueling and I was expected to practice so much, that it took away from the little play time I had. Eventually, I lost interest in this instrument and my parents never let me hear the end of it. Years later, when I went home to get my bass violin for a sentimental keepsake, my parents had sold it for five thousand dollars without even asking me. Since I didn't seriously pursue any of the cultural avenues they had forced upon me, I was accused of having no motivation. They announced that if I continued this behavior, I would never amount to anything. In all honesty, none of these endeavors really interested me and I was frustrated by the fact that I was never allowed to do anything that I aspired to do. The bottom line was that when I did what my mother wanted me to do, I was considered a "chip off the old block." And, if I didn't listen to her, she acted as if she barely knew and I was treated like a piece of dirt.

Some feral cats lived behind our duplex. The Cat Care Club would come by, set traps to take these cats away, and then put them to sleep. This bothered me a lot since I really loved animals. Our family befriended an orange tabby we named Mother Cat, who gave birth to a litter of kittens. We ended up adopting one of them, a beautiful calico we called Kitty Poo, who lived twenty-one years. I became completely absorbed with this sweet little cat and as time went on, formed very strong bonds with all our pets as they were my only true source of consolation and unconditional love.

We lived very close to the Hollywood movie studios and talent scouts would wander around the park looking for the right person for a movie or television part. My mother was approached numerous times regarding acting opportunities for my sister and me, but she flatly refused them because she didn't want us to be "ruined by Hollywood." Hearing about this many years later, I was infuriated that I was never given the choice of whether or not I even wanted to become an actress. I had many opportunities that you could only dream about that were just flushed down the toilet.

In my early school years, my mother, who was substitute teaching at that time, was placed in my classroom. I felt like the luckiest kid around having my mother as my teacher, and the other kids looked up to me for that. I was like "queen for the day" every school day that she was there. Later on, my mother got her Master's in Psychology and became a practicing counselor with some very famous clients such as actor Joel McCrea, actress Francis Dee, Julia Roth of Roth clothiers in Beverly Hills, etc.

Even though I was a "four-eyed" kid with thick glasses, the other kids never made fun of me, only an occasional stranger. My peers respected me because I was not only athletic, but usually got the highest grades in my classes. Blessed with a photographic memory, I could memorize class materials without having to understand what I was memorizing. This ability took me all the way through my Master's degree. However, I was occasionally accused of cheating by teachers because I would write exactly what my photographic memory saw on the page of a book, word for word. To defend myself, I recited the text material back to my teachers who would then offer their humblest apologies. I was also tested to have an IQ over two hundred. Possessing this type of intelligence caused my parents to expect the best from me all the time, never letting me just be a kid. I had to study, study, and study some more because anything other than academics was considered to be a waste of time.

Upon entering the fifth grade, my parents transferred me to a school called the Third Street Elementary School, for exceptional children. It was very depressing to leave my friends in my regular school behind. This new school was so much further from home and I was very scared because I was not used to being so far away. Never having traveled much, all I was familiar with was

the Plummer Park area where we lived, so I struggled to get used to my new surroundings. I went into sheer panic and for the first couple of months I cried and physically shook like a leaf as my mother drove me to school. Coaxing me out of the car each day, Mother would say, "I only expect the best from you." What a horrible reassurance! I tried to wipe away my tears and regain some sort of composure while making that traumatic walk from the car to my classroom.

The difficult part of my exceptional accelerated curriculum was that we were taught material from the year ahead, and I had a lot of catching up to do in order to keep up with my new class. For instance, if you were in the fourth grade then you were taught fifth grade material, and then in the fifth grade, you were taught sixth grade material. I was proud of the fact that my dad taught English at John Burroughs Junior High School which was only a couple of blocks away from my school. He was known by some of my classmate's siblings which made me feel a little more important, giving me a little status among my peers. With a lot of tedious, hard work, I finally became the top student in my class, joined the choir, performed in the school orchestra which made a commercial soundtrack, and developed some close friends with whom I kept in touch for many years. With every ounce of courage, I made the adjustment into this new curriculum and emerged with flying colors. My parents seemed pleased for the time being; I temporarily felt safe.

Tough Teens

West Hollywood was quickly becoming overpopulated and smog started to settle in permanently. My sister and I were getting closer to entering high school and became aware of the new gangs that were forming in the neighborhoods. My cozy playground, Plummer Park, was transforming into an arena for violence and drug dealing with accompanying arrests. We heard that a student was shot at Fairfax High School, where we were to be eventually transferred. Because of this, my parents decided that it was time for us to get out of the city, so we moved to the small town of Thousand Oaks in Ventura County about fifty miles away. This sleepy, rural town presented an enormous contrast to urbanized West Hollywood. There was very little around except cows and sheep roaming the green rolling hills that were covered with huge, sweeping oak trees. Thousand Oaks was an old-fashioned, friendly place where you got to know your gas station attendant, and if you didn't have enough money for gas, he'd say, "Bring it next time," and you did. The produce man, mailman, shoe salesman, garbage collectors, policemen, etc., all knew you on a first name basis. There were farms and ranches all around; and the horses, how I loved the horses!

My parents initially bought two houses costing ten thousand dollars each; one house was for us and the other was for my grandparents. These newly built homes, each standing on a one acre lot, were located on a pebbled road surrounded by small farms and ranches. We eagerly waited for our bigger home to be built which was to be situated on a beautiful view lot on the other side of town. After a year, we were ecstatic when it was finally completed, and we excitedly moved in.

My new school, Meadows Elementary School, was a far cry from the previous one. It was located on a hill with a grassy playground that had a gorgeous view of Thousand Oaks. The teachers accentuated the basic academics that were skipped over by my last school whose curriculum was one year ahead of everyone else; so, once again I had some catching up to do. I was given the choice of either skipping ahead or staying behind a semester. My sister chose to skip ahead, whereas I decided to stay behind because of a lack of self-confidence. I worked around the clock to master these basics, and by the time I was in eighth grade, I became class valedictorian closely tying with a fellow student. To my sheer amazement, I was also voted the "cutest smile" in this graduating class and the guys would tell me, "You'll be a real knockout when you get older." This was the first time I got any attention for my physical appearance. Because of my eye problem combined with an extremely strict

upbringing, I was painfully shy and didn't know how to accept compliments. I laughed a lot to reflect any attention away from me. My friends thought that I was happy all the time, but the opposite was really true as I was masking excruciatingly low self-esteem and debilitating sadness with humor.

Some of my new friends owned horses and I was able to spend some time horseback riding which I thoroughly enjoyed. When I visited their families, I became a little envious as I observed how lenient their parents were with them. I longed to be a part of their family because their parents didn't impose a strict time schedule on them as mine did. They were allowed to come and go with little or no hassle. I looked for any excuse to go horseback riding which became an outlet for me to get away from the continuous pressures to study, study, and more study. However, my mother would always find something to cut down about my friends or their families. When she would start her critical analysis, I would pretend that I was separate from my body and was just watching this from afar, until she finished. No one in my family had any equestrian interests, so after a day's ride they were typically repulsed by my horsey smell. It was devastating when my horseback riding buddies moved out of state and I no longer had their friendship, kindness, generous families, and access to beautiful horses.

My mother's closest friends, Lena and Henry, were the fifth richest people in the United States at the time. They lived in the expensive area of Bel Air, California, with neighbors as actresses Loretta Young and Zsa Zsa Gabor. Mother had gone to college with Lena who was now a very eccentric, wealthy lady. She had a big, black swimming pool and unusual home decorations with her strange, artsy statues that were placed all around her home. Her Christmas gifts sometimes included stale cookies wrapped very ornately that someone had probably given to her and, in turn, she passed them on to different people. We used to go shopping with Lena on Rodeo Drive and it was amazing how the sales people in every store knew her so well. She was always escorted to a special dressing room where the staff served her wine and appetizers as the store's models displayed clothes that were perfectly suited for her. This shopping experience gave me a taste of how the elite live. It was like a totally different world which I really adored. Who wouldn't love all this pampering and sophisticated shopping? I hated when these days came to an end.

One day, Lena called my mother and told her about a beautiful purebred German Shepherd whose show name was Princess Frieda of Westdean; Frieda had been bred to be a show animal. She further explained that this dog was going to be put to sleep and was hoping that maybe we could find her a home in one of the nearby ranches in Thousand Oaks. The dog's owners had carelessly allowed their kids to pluck hairs from Frieda's coat. When the dog finally became agitated and nipped at the kids, they decided it was time to get rid of her. My parents had a soft place in their hearts for animals, so they agreed to rescue the dog and the next day, we took the drive into Los Angeles. When we finally saw Frieda, her appearance was shocking! The plucked out hairs had left large bleeding scabs all over her body, and to top that off, her ribs were prominently sticking out from being so malnourished. How could anyone do this to such a precious, innocent animal? That night, we kept her in the garage because we didn't know what to expect from her. We also stored two cars in our garage, and one of them had the windows left open. Frieda must have jumped through the window of that car because the very next day, she gave birth to a litter of puppies in the back seat. Being so emaciated, it was impossible to tell that she was pregnant. The car was an absolute mess after she had given birth to her puppies, and some of her blood stains from birthing never came out. Suddenly, eight German Shepherds were running around our house with each one of us having to take turns feeding them around the clock with a bottle because Frieda was too weak to nurse; she didn't have enough milk to sustain her pups. Taking care of the pups was very tedious work, but we thoroughly enjoyed it. During this time, it was like Cara and I were on a temporary vacation from my parent's usual gestapo-like ways because they were so focused on the pups. Eventually, we placed all the pups into wonderful, loving homes.

My parents became worn out from the experience with Frieda. They decided to keep her, but

vowed that they were not going to accept anymore more pets. However, when I was about fourteen years old, while I was at my Grandmother's house, I saw the neighbors playing "catch" with a beautiful little kitten. Angered by their outright cruelty, I planned to somehow rescue this poor animal. I decided to visit my grandparents the following day to see if I could save this abused kitten. The warmth of the afternoon sun made me fall asleep on their porch. To my surprise, when I awakened, this kitten had curled up into my stomach – he had fallen asleep with me! I quickly picked him up and asked my grandfather to drive me home. When I got through the front door of my parent's house, I ran into my room, placed the kitten on my bed, and closed the bedroom door. Quickly leaving the house to avoid confrontation, I knew that by the time I returned, my parents would have wondered why my door was closed, opened it, found the kitten, and adopted him into their hearts; well, I was absolutely right. Now, officially becoming a part of our family, I decided to call him Tofu. He was a beautiful tan and white Siamese mix with bright blue eyes. Tofu became my savings grace as he was always there to comfort me whenever I cried, was sick, or needed love. I deeply appreciated him and was eternally grateful for his presence in my life. Throughout these years, my pets provided me with the love that I craved so desperately from my parents.

Some years later, a wild mallard duck wandered up our driveway and hid in the bushes by the house. Since we lived in a residential area, we had no idea where he came from. The following night, it rained and my sister was abruptly awakened by splashing sounds in our drain. Cara came into my bedroom and woke me up, and then we went outside to investigate the noise. The duck that had wandered up our driveway earlier was having a wonderful time bathing in our flooded drain. Watching his adorable playfulness, we wondered if he would still be there in the morning. Early the next day, as I walked over to the drain, I could see that he wasn't there and felt disappointed that he was nowhere to be found. While walking back to the house, suddenly, I heard this loud quacking coming from the backyard. As I ran over to the fence, the duck was playing with one of the sprinklers and had obviously flown over the gate. I ended up naming him Heidi, even though he was a male. That same day, I went to the store to buy him a child's blow-up pool, filled it with water, and we spent hours enjoying each other's company. Heidi was a happy creature and would stay by me when I did my homework on the grass in the backyard, pecking affectionately on my paper. He learned his name so every time I would call him, he'd always come running over to see me. His loving personality was very touching and after a few months, I was able to pick him up. However, one horrible day after school, I walked into the backyard to play with him, and saw Heidi lying limp on the ground. Fearing the worst, I began crying as I ran towards him to find out what was wrong. I discovered that a hawk had pecked out one of his eyes, leaving claw marks on his head. Heidi obviously fought hard for his life and with these grave injuries, needed help right away. We couldn't bring him to a veterinarian because he was a semi-wild creature, so we had to take turns putting compresses with a healing herbal formula over his eye. It was touch and go for a couple of weeks, and we weren't sure that he was going to survive. Because we took such good care of him, he finally regained his health, but a problem arose that we hadn't expected. Heidi used to see three hundred sixty degrees around him by turning his head, and now, because one of his eyes was missing, he could only see one hundred eighty degrees. Walking up to his blind side made him very panicky, but he finally got used to it and became calmer as time went on.

Interestingly, our cat, dog, and duck used to sleep and play together. Since all our animals accepted each other so openly and lovingly, I wondered why people couldn't be the same way, especially my family. My parents showed such kindness, patience, love, and sensitivity to our pets, but why couldn't they have been this way to their own children? This just didn't make sense.

Heidi lived for only a year after this accident. He eventually developed severe arthritis because he spent too much time walking on the land playing with the Frieda and Tofu, and not enough time in the water. After his four year stay with us, he died under a bush. We sadly buried him in our backyard while our dog and cat went on to live many years beyond Heidi's passing.

At about this time in my life, my parents suddenly decided that we should become vegetarians. The family went on a very strict vegetarian health food diet with the only animal products being occasional cheese and eggs. I was totally flabbergasted when I came home one day to find our house thoroughly cleaned out of all the food I used to enjoy eating as everything had been replaced with raw vegetables. No longer was I allowed to eat the food that I was accustomed to eating all of my life. There was no more meat whatsoever! It was a bland, distasteful diet which caused me to feel hungry all the time. Plagued with recurring episodes of weakness and nausea, my body became more and more fatigued. My hormones were thrown so far out of balance, that after being skinny my entire life, I rapidly gained a lot of weight. Going from thin to fat was like a horrible nightmare from hell as I went from a size four to a size thirteen in a matter of weeks. Of course, my parents didn't blame this dramatic change on their newfound diet, but instead, attributed most of the weight gain to emotional problems that I was causing myself. Subsequently, they took me to see a highly recommended naturopathic doctor in Ojai. Within six months of beginning treatment and supplement therapy, I was back to my normal size.

Judging from my results, this doctor proved to be extremely knowledgeable as his reputation had suggested. However, there was another problem since he used some very strange, unorthodox techniques during our clinical sessions. As I lay on the therapy table, this doctor pulled down his pants and would instruct me to touch his penis while he massaged my abdomen. He explained, "This is a vital part of the therapy." He went on to say, "Don't be scared, it's not going to hurt you." Being twelve or thirteen years old, I had never seen a penis before and felt not only ashamed, but humiliated as well. I didn't know who to turn to or what to do. Thank God, this was not required at all the treatments, just most of them. When I didn't have to touch him during a session, I was always so relieved. Dreading my visits, I tried to make excuses to my parents as to why I didn't want to go to see this doctor, but they ignored my pleas. My sister was visiting him for other reasons and when I asked her if she had to touch his penis as part of the therapy, she said, "Yes." She and I both struggled with this dilemma and when I tried to approach Mother about this situation, she was not at all receptive. She simply didn't believe me, so I was forced to drop the subject. My sister was always too afraid of our mother to back me up on anything. After our treatments were finished, neither my sister nor I ever mentioned this again. My parents were also treated by this doctor and I couldn't help but wonder what went on in their examination rooms. This was too repulsive to think about, so I just let it go.

My parents tried to find the highest quality foods money could buy, and being so academic, they were always aware of the latest and greatest nutrition theory...only to find that one theory contradicted the next! Living from theory to theory continued to wreak havoc on my young, still-developing body, and over time, I felt physically weaker and weaker. To get a temporary energy boost, sometimes I snuck over to my grandparent's house and ate some candy, or drank a soda, just to get a little sugar in my system. My grandmother felt sorry for me and tried to sneak in whatever food she could in an attempt to help. But eventually, I felt so guilty about going behind my mother's back, that I discontinued those visits to my grandmother for a while. When I complained to my mother about my fatigue and the other physical symptoms I was developing, true to form, she would always say, "It's all psychological," and that was that. This was her answer to everything and she always left me feeling so empty, lonely, and helpless. My only solution was to live with the physical discomfort and hope that it would eventually go away, but I became more and more withdrawn, distancing myself from my parents as much as possible.

Elementary schools in Thousand Oaks went up to the eighth grade; there were no intermediary schools. High school was from the ninth to twelfth grade. My high school days were mainly spent studying, studying, and more studying. I didn't have much for a social life and I thought that was the way it was supposed to be. My sister became a top honor student, and by the time I reached high school, everyone expected me to be just like her. I started to question why I should get As when Bs

could accomplish the same goals of getting into college. With this in mind, I tried to enjoy my classes more and stopped worrying about getting the highest grade. My parents stayed off my back as long as they knew my grades were good enough for college acceptance.

In high school, I still didn't understand anything about the male-female relationship. Some of my friends in high school were going steady and that was something that I never saw happening for me. I never dated anyone, but had a few distant crushes. With my eye problem, I never felt pretty enough for anyone to like me back, so I tended to observe from afar. My biggest crush was on the actor Kurt Russell, who was in the class ahead of me. When he wore his sexy, black skin-tight jeans with his black shirt and boots, that outfit drove me and a whole slew of other girls crazy! The closest I got to him in high school was taking driver's education with his sister.

Later, in high school, I suffered from an acute case of pneumonia. In order to recuperate, I was kept out of school for a couple of weeks. My mother conjured up a cruel psychological analysis saying that I was infected by pneumonia because I'd had a sexual experience with some guy in school that I wasn't able to face up to. How humiliating! I was totally startled by her absurd accusation since it was the furthest thing from the truth. Being romantically awkward, I had never even kissed a guy and was still a virgin. In high school, I was so backwards that I still didn't fully understand the concept of sex. The discussion of sex was considered to be voodoo in my family. Even though I had touched that doctor's penis so many years earlier, the only other exposure I had to sex was looking at a picture of a large-sized penis that the girls were passing around in the restroom. And, since Mother always insisted that sex was something you did after you were married, I didn't question it. Her reasons for accusing me of this were beyond my comprehension, but she persisted with this insinuation. Little did I know that this incident was only the beginning of the some of the most excruciatingly, hellish years to come.

To my total amazement, a dear friend, Don, who was one of the handsomest guys in my high school class, asked me out to the high school prom. I wanted to accept his invitation more than anything in this entire world, but declined because I had no confidence in myself. And, after the perplexing pneumonia incident with my mother, I was very squeamish about bringing anyone home to meet my weird parents who were highly critical of anyone I called my friend. Don took my refusal very personally and I was completely devastated when he never spoke to me ever again. I was just too shy to tell him the real reasons as to why I couldn't accept his invitation.

Most of my high school courses were finished ahead of time because my parents demanded that I attend school during the summers in order to graduate sooner. So, I went half-day to high school during my last semester with the other half spent at Moorpark Junior College. Going to my high school graduation was not allowed since my parents felt that I was already in college and it would only be a "waste of time." First, I had to miss my high school prom, and now the graduation that I had been looking forward to for so long. I never even got the chance to say goodbye to most of my high school friends.

The Collegiate

I began Moorpark Junior College on a full-time basis. This college had just been built and was located in the beautiful hills surrounding the small and scarcely-populated town of Moorpark. There was only a couple of winding country roads to get to the college which was about ten to fifteen miles outside of Thousand Oaks. This college specialized in the academic majors of agriculture and farming. To my complete surprise, there were about fifteen guys to each girl because not many women wanted to go to this school due to its agricultural emphasis, and because it was located so far out in the country. I had two reasons for deciding to go to a junior college. First, my sister and I were

forbidden to live in an apartment or dorm so we could not venture any distance from home. Our parents wanted to keep an eye on us at all times in order to make sure that we grew up “properly.” And second, even though I had the grades to get into any university, coming from such a small town I was nervous about attending school on a large campus, so Moorpark Junior College seemed like the best choice. Amazingly enough, this quaint junior college had some excellent teachers on the faculty, some of whom authored our textbooks, and with the small classes, I truly enjoyed the personalized education.

Attending Moorpark gave me a whole new lease on life as I began to realize that there was a different world outside the iron walls my parents had built around me all these years. Feeling very frustrated and fed up with their cruel, unrealistic rules, I yearned to be with my new friends and build a life that I could call my own. I started noticing the opposite sex and felt the rush of my hormones; I craved a real social life. Two fellow students by the name of Sharon Daniels and Laurie Randall became my best friends. I also met a few guys and we all started hanging out together. I began to skip classes and spent afternoons at the beach with my new friends. Most of them were guys and I really enjoyed their masculine energy which was new to me. It felt absolutely exhilarating to get away from the old grind of all work and no play. So I wouldn't fall behind in my classes, I borrowed the daily lecture notes from classmates and still received good grades. My new social life was kept a secret from my parents since it was not in their belief system to have fun. This newfound feeling of freedom inspired me to take a part-time job at the local Kmart where I could start earning money. When I informed Mother that I had gotten a job at Kmart, she just looked away. I loved my new job and the feeling of making my own money, and quickly formed a crush on the manager of the front cashiers. We both enjoyed teasing each other and laughing together. But, within three months, unbeknownst to me, my mother made a phone call to Kmart to have my job terminated. I was so humiliated and embarrassed when one day, I went to work and found that I had been dismissed for no apparent reason. Mother was obviously stressed over my newfound independence and felt that she was losing control over me. Her excuse was that Kmart was taking me away from my studies even though I was maintaining excellent grades.

Sharon felt sorry for me because of the ugly, outdated clothes my mother chose for me, so she let me borrow some of her clothes to wear to school. Routinely, I would leave my house in the morning, immediately go over to Sharon's house, change into her clothes, drive to school, and then after school change back into my own clothes, returning Sharon's clothes the next day for a new outfit. She saved me so much embarrassment because I was never allowed to wear a dress that was more than an inch above my knee when mini-skirts were the fashion, or a bikini, as it showed too much skin. Going to the beach with a guy was absolutely out of the question, since according to my parents, we were both almost nude. Sleeping over a girlfriend's house was not a possibility either because my mother was afraid that I would be raped by their father or brother. Going to parties was difficult because my parents did not want me exposed to drugs or “promiscuous behavior.” So, in order to experience some of the normal things in life, I had to lie by saying that I was studying with a friend.

Lying became a way of life and I hated to lie as it went against the grain of my soul. As exhausting as it was, it took a lot of forethought and preparation just to be able to experience some kind of normalcy in my life. Sometimes, Mom or Dad would make a phone call to a friend's parents to check up on me, but I always covered my back to keep myself protected. Trust was never a part of my relationship with my parents; they didn't trust me and I didn't trust them with their complete manipulation and control of every aspect of my life. I lived with a dark, debilitating cloud of fear constantly hovering over me, and their guilt trips were unbearable. Even the music that I loved to listen to was under scrutiny. My beloved rock and roll was considered “voodoo” music and not permitted in their house. At night, after they went to bed, or at other times when they didn't know I was home, I used to spend many hours in my closet with a flashlight reading the books that I was

curious about. I bought a little transistor radio so I could listen to my “voodoo” music quietly with an earphone hidden under my pillow to avoid heavy criticism. In time, I was finally able to talk my parents into buying me some wire-rimmed glasses with beveled edges instead of the black plastic horned rims that I always wore. This dramatically improved my appearance and was another small step I took on my own behalf.

Going back to my days at Kmart, the head cashier that I liked was named Gary. He pursued me romantically, always following me around Kmart whistling at my legs and joking about me over the loudspeaker as the store was about to close. He left romantic cards and notes on my car, and looked for me on the campus at school. I was really flattered by his attention and for the first time, fell in love. I reluctantly decided to bring Gary home to meet my parents. He was very nervous because I had warned him about my weird family, but despite that, he was such a good sport. When we got to my parent’s house, because the tension was thick and uncomfortable, Gary only stayed a short time. Immediately after he left, my mother verbally mutilated him behind his back with her disgusting psychological analysis of his imperfections. As usual, she went for the jugular about everything she felt was wrong with him, and all I could do was maintain consistent eye contact to avoid further harassment. Even though Gary accepted my parents as being wacky, he never came over to my house ever again. In spite of it all, we continued our platonic relationship outside of my house. He was very respectful of the fact that I didn’t want to have sex until marriage, and never pushed the issue.

My friend, Laurie was throwing a party in a couple of days which Gary was planning on attending. Even though Gary and I hung out together when we could, I was still very backwards sexually and had never even kissed him. Sharon’s boyfriend, Ted, knew that I had been too shy to kiss anyone, so he volunteered to teach me how to French kiss. I liked Ted and had spent a lot of time with him as he was one of the guys that hung out with Sharon and me at the beach when I was playing hooky from school. So, with Sharon’s permission, I took Ted up on his offer and was excited to learn. In case Gary wanted to kiss me at Laurie’s party, Ted wanted to make sure that I knew what I was doing so I could impress him. After a brief kissing lesson, which I thoroughly enjoyed, Ted felt I had learned quickly and was definitely ready.

On the night of the party, I was very nervous and paced around Laurie’s house. A couple of hours into the evening, Gary still had not arrived. I started to think that something had come up and he wasn’t going to show up at all. So, I tried to engage in conversation with some of the other guests to take my mind off of Gary. Just when I totally gave up, the doorbell rang and he walked in. My heart started pounding very hard in my chest. I didn’t feel as comfortable around Gary as I usually did because of my sexual tension. We went into Laurie’s bedroom, and after all my preparation and anticipation, nothing happened because I actually felt guilty about wanting to express my affectionate feelings towards him. My parents’ repressive words about sex echoed in my head and I knew that I sent out a lot of confusing signals. A little while later, Laurie’s father asked everyone to leave the party; Gary and I went our separate ways. My inner frustration was overwhelming, but I decided to chalk it up to the fact that it just wasn’t the right time to express myself sexually, consoling myself with the fact that I had my whole future ahead of me.

Years later, Gary and I bumped into each other by accident and it felt like we had never been apart. I noticed a marriage band on his finger and tried to hold back my tears. He still had those sparkling blue eyes and adorable dimpled smile. After briefly catching up on things, Gary looked deep into my eyes and professed that he realized that I was the woman he really wanted to marry. Totally shocked, I almost fell off my feet! He told me that he had been looking for me for years and that many times he had tried to call my parents to find out my whereabouts, and they discouraged him from contacting me. Even though I was still living at home when Gary made his calls, I was never told about it and not even given a choice in this matter; I was heartbroken when he expressed this to me. Gary continued to let me know that since I had gone to another school and he couldn’t find me, he married somebody else. We hugged each other, both trying to wipe away our tears. After

we wished each other well, I walked away without looking back...it was too painful.

After Moorpark Junior College, I transferred to the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA). I frequently visited a restaurant called Le Foyer De France which was owned by a French couple. My sister and I considered them to be our godparents because they were long-time friends of our parents. After my classes at UCLA, I'd usually have to wait until the rush-hour freeway traffic subsided before I could drive home. So, I would walk to their restaurant, which was located in Westwood Village right by UCLA, and run their cash register. During my breaks, I'd sneak into the restaurant kitchen where the food was prepared, and when the chefs weren't looking, dip my fingers into the large containers of rich French chocolate and sample the other assorted delicious French delicacies. This was such a novelty to me since we were not allowed to have sweets at home. Many famous people such as Goldie Hawn, Jacquelyn Smith, Farah Fawcett, former governor Pat Brown (current California Governor Jerry Brown's father), etc., regularly frequented this restaurant, and I was always excited to see what celebrity would come in next.

I continuously traveled back and forth between UCLA and Thousand Oaks. this exhausting drive would take one to two and a half hours depending on traffic. Despite this inconvenience, my parents were happy because I still lived under their roof, and they could keep a close eye on everything that I was doing. UCLA would seem huge to anyone, but especially to me, having come from such a small town. After you parked your car, you had to take a city bus to get onto the UCLA campus. I hadn't been on many city buses so I didn't realize that you were supposed to reach up and pull the cord to let the bus driver know that you wanted to get off at the next stop. On my very first trip taking the shuttle from the parking lot to the UCLA campus, more and more people were leaving the bus until finally, the bus was at the last stop and I was the only one left. The driver looked at me very strangely and drove me back to the parking lot. I ended up walking to the campus which caused me to be tardy to my first class; I felt so humiliated! With crowded, impersonal classrooms, sometimes you had to watch a television monitor to be able to see your professor or whoever was giving the lecture. The campus was extremely large and spread out so if you had a class on one side of campus, and then had to go to the other side of the campus for your next class, chances are you'd be late. I really missed the quaintness of Moorpark and felt like a fish out of water at UCLA. After one quarter, I'd had enough and transferred to the California State University in Northridge (CSUN), a much smaller campus closer to home, and of course, my parents were thrilled.

While attending Cal State Northridge, I studied Speech Therapy. There, I met a young man named Lou, who was the men's gymnastics coach, and we quickly fell in love. We had numerous conversations about my life and background, and I carefully explained the idiosyncratic ways of my weird parents. I was thrilled that Lou was not judgmental about my strict upbringing and strange family, and it didn't deter his feelings for me. He became a very loving and gentle influence in my life. Lou and I went together for two and a half years in secret; this was secret only to my family not my friends. I wanted to spend more time with him and craved an intimate relationship. At this time, I still wasn't allowed to stay overnight anywhere, so I had to strategize an ingenious plot to be able to spend the night with him. Since my parents had already met my friend Cindy and they respected her because she was not only a good student, but came from a wealthy background, I felt she would be able to help me. Cindy and I decided to tell my mother that I was spending the night with her because I had a test very early the next morning, and we were going to study together. Thankfully, I was able to convince my mother that Cindy's father and brother would not try to rape me, and I was perfectly safe.

Lou was always very kind and patient. He was eager to spend the night together, but understood that I had to make careful preparations to cover my tracks. Finally, everything was finally in place. Since this would be the first time I would let a man get intimate with me, I was nervous because even in college, I was still so naive about sex. But that night, when Lou tried to gently put his penis inside of me, I freaked out! I thought that since his penis touched my vagina, I was probably pregnant; in

reality, he never penetrated me or even broke my hymen. Panicking, I jumped out of the bed, and without saying anything to him, ran out of his apartment slamming the door behind me. For the rest of the night, I stayed in my car, which I parked on the side of the road near the campus, crying and shaking as I was grappling with the horrible fear of being pregnant. If my mother ever found out that I was Lou, I knew I would be as good as dead. Overwhelmed with guilt, I could hardly think straight. The next morning, I changed my clothes in the gym before class. Hiding my panic from my friends, I tried very hard to concentrate on my classes, but a couple of them asked me why I looked so tired. I just responded by saying, "I didn't get enough sleep."

After school, I took the painstaking drive back to Thousand Oaks. My nerves were on edge as I didn't know what was in store for me at home. The minute I walked through the door, I realized that my worst nightmare was about to come true. Mother immediately caught my eyes and gave me one of her evil, disgusted looks, and as usual, my father just stood there glaring at me with his arms crossed. I couldn't imagine how they found out that I was not with Cindy, but somehow they did, and I was raked me over the coals for what seemed like hours. Typically, my father never came to my defense for anything and always stood there providing a support system for Mother's manipulative ways. This incident was no exception as he continued to glare at me while she conducted her ruthless interrogation. They told me that if I was pregnant with Lou's baby, they would make sure that I got an abortion. Having met Lou only once, they had immediately decided that he was not right for me, just as they had done with Gary. Lou came from a well-to-do family but had a congenital heart murmur. My mother considered Lou's heart murmur a sign of weakness, even though he was an active gymnast and a contender for the Olympic Games. My heart sank as once again I felt powerless to go against her decisions.

When I got my next period, the relief was overwhelming! I'd never been so grateful to have my period in my whole life. Being so petrified of my mother I decided to quickly disappear out of Lou's life. About a year later, Lou and I coincidentally bumped into each other at a park. Even though enough time had passed that I didn't feel as squeamish about what had happened, I still felt that I owed him an explanation as to why I had suddenly run out of his apartment that night. After I carefully explained what I had gone through, his eyes fell to the ground. Looking up with a couple of tears rolling down his face, he told me how horrible he felt that I not only had gone through so much, but that he didn't realize how naïve I was about sex. He held me in his arms reassuring me that he still had a special place in his heart for me that was filled with love. This deeply touched me because I felt that I had made such a fool out of myself, and wondered how he could still love me after all that. Lou then looked deeply into my eyes, and asked for my hand in marriage. I was shocked! We stood there holding each other and cried. But, with very deep reluctance, I told Lou that it would never work out. Something inside me still wanted to please my parents, and I knew that I couldn't explain this to Lou because he just wouldn't understand. I wanted loving parents more than anything and hoped that if I changed, they would too. Of course, that turned out to be far from the truth, but that's what I had to believe at that time in order to survive. Despite all this, Lou told me that he would always love me. We hugged once more and then sadly went our separate ways, and I never saw him again.

Things got increasingly worse at home. Ever since my parents found out about my night with Lou, they were stricter than ever heavily scrutinizing my clothes, make-up, hairstyle, personal thoughts, where I went, who I was with, etc. With ridiculous curfews that lasted well into my twenties, I felt like I was living in a Nazi concentration camp. If I came home a little past curfew, I would crawl into bed with my clothes on, holding my urine in all night to avoid a painful, debilitating cross-examination by my parents as to why I was late. This eventually caused a serious physical problem down the line. But, I was so terrified of their gestapo-style interrogations that could last for hours because, no matter what, I was always wrong and they were always right -- there was simply nothing in between.

My mother possessed a gift of acute intuitiveness that some people would call extra sensory perception. She was remarkably accurate in some of her predictions but, as time went on, she used this gift to manipulate and control my sister and me. However, she gradually lost this intuitive gift and began to make up things that just weren't true, but, unfortunately she believed her own lies. Her delusions were so irritating that I just wanted to scream at the top of my lungs in total frustration because her lies were getting crazier and crazier.

Mother constantly complained about some ache, pain, or illness for which I was almost always blamed. One day, when I was nineteen, I came home from school and my father was waiting for me in the hallway. As I stepped through the front door, he grabbed my arm and slapped my face so hard that my glasses flew off. He yelled, "Your mother's dying and it's your fault. You are aggravating her to death!" I was in complete shock and the sting on my face from his slap just didn't seem to go away. He totally caught me off guard and I couldn't believe what he had just done. Later, I found out that my mother was never dying, nor was she even close to death. But, his harsh accusations plagued my mind for many years as I suffered from a deep guilt for a rationale that never made any sense.

Since none of my mother's manipulative games were working anymore, she decided that I must be taking drugs, was a total slut (even though I was still a virgin), and stealing their money to give to my friends. The drug question came up when my parents found what they considered to be drugs in the glove compartment of my car. Instead of bringing them to my attention and asking me what they were, they stole my telephone book and reported all of my friends to the police. When the police had these "drugs" analyzed, they found that they were just aspirin. I found out about this when a couple of my friends called me because they had been questioned by the police. I was shocked that my parents would do this to me and my friends; I just wanted to crawl into a hole and die. Even though my friends understood that my parents had serious mental problems, and they forgave me, my relationships were never quite the same. I had a hard time looking into the eyes of those who had been reported to the police by my parents. Because of this, I became more of a loner and began spending a lot more time by myself.

In addition to the social problems I endured because of my parents, and the constant, painful criticism I withstood at home, their strict vegetarian diet continued wreaking havoc on my body. Look extremely frail, I always felt sick and could barely eat anything without feeling nauseous. During my last year in college, I was so weak that I had a hard time staying awake in my classes. I begged my mother to let me see a doctor, and once again she stated, "It's all in your head," and true to form, she completely resisted the idea. She felt that the vegetarian diet was healthy and that it was ridiculous to blame my health problems on such a great diet.

My sister, Cara, and I had been very close as kids. She was my best friend. However, as we became older, Mother played one against the other as part of her game of total control. Mother had the paranoid fear that every time Cara and I were together, we were saying bad things behind about her back. In order to feel protected against us, she would assign us the roles of good guy, bad guy, or whatever suited her at that moment. Sometimes, I would be the good guy and my mother coerced me to spy on my sister who was the bad guy, or vice versa. Her paranoia permeated all my relationships: boyfriends, girlfriends, family friends, and even my grandparents, as I was accused of talking behind her back to everybody! As time went on, Cara and I became so frightened of our mother that Cara started having a nervous breakdown. I would see her weirdly tapping things, stepping only on certain floor tiles as she walked into the different rooms in our house, rolling her eyes around at certain times when she was speaking to someone, and making strange jerky movements with her hands and arms. It was very frightening to see her get more and more out of control, and I didn't know what to do to help her. When I asked her why she did these weird things, she told me that she would fling out her fingers to get Mother's evilness away from her. This strange behavior was still going on when I finally left some years later.

Cara finally fell in love with Dave, a man she met while attending UCLA. Dave was tall, slender,

and very handsome, but he had a Mexican-American background which displeased Mother, who was a total bigot. Because of this, she forbade Cara to continue her relationship with Dave. Cara was deeply scarred for life when Mother caught them kissing in our backyard. A very precious moment for Cara turned out to be her worst nightmare because she never heard the end of Mother's disapproval which pushed her further into depression. He was the one true love in my sister's life, and I felt sorry that she couldn't stand up for herself against Mother, as I was struggling to do. Under pressure, Cara broke off her relationship with Dave, who later went on to become a professor at Stanford University.

Cara had to deal with the same parental scrutiny that I did. We finally decided to join forces and started lying for each other so that we could both have some semblance of a normal social life. In time, she met another man at work and enjoyed spending time with him. And, of course, when Mother found out, she highly disapproved so Cara secretly continued that relationship for a couple of years. Whenever Cara would bring a potential boyfriend over to our house for my parents' approval, Mother instructed me to "wear something that keeps your body covered up, sit quietly in the corner, and do not say anything. We don't want her boyfriend going after you." I obeyed her commands, but felt extremely disheartened because I would never think of stealing anyone away from my sister. I really wanted her to find some happiness.

Mother somehow discovered that Cara was confiding in me. Because of the intense, grueling, interrogative sessions, I finally broke down under her guilt-tripping pressure and regrettably told her all of Cara's secrets. Mother was pleased that she finally was able to regain her control. Apparently, Cara had also folded under Mother's pressure and spilled all my secrets. Our close relationship was ultimately destroyed since we felt that we couldn't trust each other anymore. Despite this rift, I still loved my sister, but we both felt that we had betrayed each other; nothing was the same between us ever again.

I totally severed my relationship with Cara after she started dating Jack. Jack was a millionaire who lived in a huge mansion in Bel Air. Cara felt that he was her romantic destiny because Mother was delighted that Jack was so rich. One weekend, Jack invited Cara to his other home in Montecito, a small, very wealthy beach town bordering Santa Barbara. Cara asked me to come along to see if I could "help her win this man over." I wasn't exactly sure what she meant, and even though there was a rift between us, I wanted her to be happy. After we spent a little time enjoying the view of the ocean from Jack's balcony, Cara and Jack jumped into his jacuzzi and then asked me to join them, so I did. It was a beautiful day, the jacuzzi felt wonderful, and at that moment, life couldn't get much better. I thought it was very sweet when Cara and Jack started to hug each other. They began kissing and you could see their tongues intertwining in a long, passionate kiss that never seemed to stop. I was starting to feel uncomfortable, so I turned my back to give them some privacy and figure out what to do. Through the corner of my eye, I could see Jack push Cara's bathing suit top up and he started fondling her breasts. Feeling completely embarrassed, I wondered how Cara could continue this sexual play in front of me. Jack started moving his hands up and down her spine, and then proceeded to slide his hand down the front of her bathing suit. Totally absorbed in the heat of passion, Cara started to moan and groan in ecstasy.

Jack saw me start to get out of the jacuzzi and stretched out his hand to pull me towards them to make a threesome. I couldn't believe this was happening! Thoroughly disgusted and deeply offended, I quickly jumped out of the hot tub and ran back to his house locking myself in one of his bathrooms. Within a few minutes, my sister came in after me and reassured me that this wouldn't happen again. She coaxed me out of the bathroom and Jack lit up the fireplace. I barely had a chance to catch my breath before Jack and Cara started taking off their bathing suits in front of the fire. To my utter humiliation, I was once again invited to join in. I then insisted that Cara meet me in the bathroom, and once there, begged her to get us out of there. Cara told me that she really wanted Jack, and this is where she needed my help --. I couldn't believe my ears! Her desperation was totally repulsive to me

and I demanded that we leave immediately. Reluctantly, she told Jack that something had come up and we made our exit. On the way home, we didn't say a word to each other. As soon as we got back, I went into my room and shut the door. I lay in bed with my eyes closed and pretended that I was taking a nap. Feeling sickened by what had just happened, I needed someone to talk to, but I didn't know who to turn for help.

A couple of days later, I told my mother about this entire situation and its humiliating effect on me, and to my amazement, she took it very calmly. However, she never mentioned anything to Cara about my hurt feelings. This woman, my mother, so full of self-proclaimed principles, was a total hypocrite! I guess she desperately wanted Cara to marry a rich man at any cost. This subject was never brought up again by anyone. But, a couple of years later, when I was shopping at a health food store in Santa Monica, somebody came up behind me and put his arms around my shoulders. Of all people, it was Jack! He was a tall man of six feet six inches so he was strikingly noticeable everywhere he went. I took one look at him, turned around, and slugged him as hard as I could in the stomach; he fell back and tried to catch his breath. Everyone present was quite alarmed at this situation although no one interfered. Jack just stood there with a strange grin on his face trying to cover up his embarrassment. I left the store proudly feeling that Jack finally got what he deserved. That was the last I ever saw him.

Just like in high school, my parents would not allow me to attend my college graduation ceremonies at Cal State Northridge for my Bachelor's degree. I was already in the Master's program at another school so they considered this graduation formality a waste of time. I had run up against an obstacle in completing the Speech Therapy Master's program at CSUN. With a long waiting list for my last couple of required courses, I would have to wait a year to finish my graduate degree. My parents did not want to waste any time, immediately transferring me to the California Lutheran College in Thousand Oaks, which was even closer to home. Because Speech Therapy wasn't offered at this college, my focus was shifted to the closest available degree which was Education. I really did not want a degree in Education because I had no desire to become a teacher. However, I was never offered any alternatives, so I just went along with the program. I still longed to spread my wings and live in my own apartment, but my parents threatened to cut off my schooling, the only thing I had to hold onto, at the mere mention of getting my own place. I became exhausted from the lack of curricular breaks, but luckily was able to convince my parents to let me take a short break before completing my Master's.

The most incredible miracle happened to me during this break. All my life, I had been an invalid without my glasses and my eyesight was getting worse. Then one day, when I was driving down the Ventura Freeway, I put my finger on my nose to lift up my glasses as a matter of habit, and to my utter amazement, they weren't there -- I was seeing clearly! This was completely mind boggling as to how I could be driving without my glasses? Immediately pulling off to the side of the road, I began to hyperventilate because I was scared and couldn't understand what was happening. Frantically, I searched the car for my glasses and they weren't there. I quickly turned the car around and headed home while I kept my eyes in a tight squint as I would normally do to be able to see without my glasses. When I arrived home, I ran into my bedroom, shut the blinds, hopped into my bed, and pulled the covers over my head. I hysterically screamed out to my parents to find my glasses which, as I found out, were on the side of my bed where I had left them the night before. I was so relieved to find them, but when I put them on, everything was a blur and when I took them off, everything looked clear! My parents couldn't believe what was happening. They told me to look in the mirror, so I jumped up and found that my lazy eye was looking straight back at me! I got back into bed because I was afraid that I was imagining this whole thing, eventually coaxing myself to sleep. The next morning, my parents took me to an eye doctor who performed an in-depth exam. They decided not to show the doctor my glasses because they felt it might influence his diagnosis. To our total amazement, the doctor said, "She has perfect vision and may only need reading glasses later in life."

When we showed him my glasses, he pointed out that he had a similar problem to the one he observed in my prescription and had to wear trifocals. I never felt that this doctor truly believed that I had ever worn those glasses, but the fact that I no longer needed them was a total miracle!

As I had mentioned before, I continued to be jealous of my friends' relationships with their parents. Their mothers and fathers took the time to understand their kids and honored their opinions whereas, in my case, the opposite was true. My friend's parents were easy to get along with while my parents acted like they were "the chosen people," as if it was everyone's privilege to be in their presence because they knew it all. Most of the time, I pretended that my friends' parents were mine. This fantasy always made it difficult to go back to my real home. Sometimes, I even wondered if I had been adopted and reasoned, "If I was really their child, they would treat me differently." And, I went so far as to tell everyone I was adopted for about six years. Unfortunately, my sister suffered just as much as I did, but never admitted her anguish and remains in denial to this very day.

One day, as I was completing the courses for my Master's degree in Education, I decided to take a break from my studies. I drove to our local health food store called the Kaiser Nutrition Center, located on one of the main malls in Thousand Oaks, for a protein drink. As I sat quietly sipping my drink, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I quickly looked up and when I recognized who it was, I almost fainted. Of all the people in the world, it was Kurt Russell, and he looked even more handsome than he did in high school! His incredibly breathtaking looks made me feel weak in the knees and the fact that he was talking to me, was something I'd only fantasized about in my dreams. I admired his beautiful smile with his well-known dimples, and even though it was difficult for me to talk to him, I managed to chat a little while. He was my distant crush for years as our elementary schools used to play team sports against each other, and to think that he was talking to me was unbelievable! My stomach was in knots and I could hardly swallow my protein shake. Then, to my complete surprise, out of nowhere, he asked me to go out with him that very evening! I became totally tongue-tied and almost froze. All I could do was respond by saying, "No thank you." I very quickly left some money on the counter for my drink, gave him a little smile, and hurriedly walked out. In reality, even though I no longer wore glasses, and had been receiving more attention from men, I still didn't have the confidence to go out with someone as legendary as Kurt Russell. Most of all, I didn't want anyone meeting my weird parents, especially him. This decision is something that I have always regretted. What single young woman wouldn't wonder what it would have been like to go out with Kurt Russell? But down deep, considering all things like my shyness and crazy parents -- I knew that I had done the right thing.

Struggling to be Free

During the time while I was finishing my Master's degree, I decided to volunteer in the Pediatrics Division at the UCLA Medical Center. I knew that my parents would approve and that this choice would give me more diversity in my life as well as an excuse to get away from home. At UCLA, I met Beth, a volunteer in Pediatrics who became my very best friend. We were inseparable and did just about everything together; Beth became like a sister to me. Of course, Mother didn't like Beth because I was spending more time with her than at home. Eventually, Beth's family started complaining about all the time we were spending together because they felt that she was neglecting her responsibilities. But, I felt lucky to have such a wonderful friend – it was a friendship that lasted for thirteen years.

I truly enjoyed working with the children in Pediatrics. My favorite patient was an anorexic child that I could really relate to because she felt totally misunderstood by her parents and had problems communicating with them. She wasn't getting any better, and after petitioning to be able to take her

outside the clinic, I was granted permission. We took long walks together, talking for hours by the poolside at the UCLA recreation center. She relaxed so much and was happy that she found someone who finally understood her. Because of that, she gained the weight she needed to be considered healthy, and the doctors were pleased with her progress. In time, they dismissed her from the hospital because they felt it was safe to let her to go home. We had formed a very deep bond and I missed her company when she left. Pediatrics was never the same without her as the halls felt empty and whenever I passed her room, there was a void in my heart. I had been the Mother to her that I longed to have for myself, and it was a gratifying experience to have had such a positive effect on another persons' life

During my volunteer days, my mother expected me to call home at least five times a day to report everything and anything. She wanted me to marry a doctor and felt that all my social communication with the doctors on the Pediatrics floor needed to be coached, so, we'd strategize accordingly. One day, a very tall, six foot six inch man started following me around Pediatrics. He was so tall that he really stood out in the crowd. I didn't find him attractive because he was looked like the typical professor type, and I preferred jocks. Because he was following me so much, I did some research to find out who he was. It turned out that his name was Peter, and with his Ph.D. was one of the head scientists in the Pharmacology Department. One day, Peter tapped me on the shoulder and asked me if I'd like to go out with him. I just didn't find him desirable, so I said, "I'll think about it." When I called my mother to report this event to her, she insisted that I accept the date because after all, Peter had a prestigious position and that's what really mattered to her. So, I begrudgingly accepted and that weekend he drove all the way out to Thousand Oaks from Los Angeles to pick me up. He arrived late leaving only enough time to see a movie called Uptown Saturday Night.

After the movie, Peter took me home. He wanted to kiss me good night, but I was hesitant. However, the strangest thing happened. When I finally gave in and kissed him, there was like a magnetic force that made it hard to stop kissing and we just wanted to continue kissing forever. This was so unexpected and startled us both. Due to this passionate experience, he became the most attractive man that I had ever met. After kissing him, I felt as if I was "glowing in the dark." For six months, we continued to date with the passion of the first kiss which never seemed to fade. We'd kiss for hours in what seemed like a hypnotic state. Because of this phenomenon, I fell deeply in love and he seemed to feel the same way about me. Peter never pushed the issue of sex since he knew that I didn't believe in sex before marriage.

One day, Peter called requesting a time to talk. I was excited because I thought he was going to ask me to marry him. When he arrived, he looked unusually stressed and nervous. I chalked this up to the fact that he was probably anxious about proposing to me and I was really looking forward for our "talk." I hopped in the car and we drove down Topanga Canyon Road which was a somewhat windy mountainous drive that led to the beach. I knew how much Peter loved the ocean and thought that it was sweet that he was bringing me to his favorite spot. Instead, he suddenly pulled into a park which was halfway down the highway. As he shut off the engine, he looked into my eyes in a way that I had never seen before. As shocking as it was, he conveyed to me that all the time that we were dating, he had been engaged to a girl back east named Mary. My mouth fell open and I started to cry as I couldn't believe what I was hearing. He continued by saying that he was under considerable pressure from his family to marry her and since his folks had already considered Mary to be a part of their family, he needed to do the right thing. Furthermore, he explained that he had never intended for our relationship to go as far as it did and that he was very sorry. By that time, being completely devastated, I couldn't even look into his eyes. Peter kept apologizing over and over again which infuriated me even more. I wanted to scream out, "You lousy, selfish bastard!" Then, to make matters worse, he informed me that Mary was coming out from back east in a week or so to marry him; by that time, my patience was gone. I demanded that he take me home immediately. The drive back was horrible and I didn't say a word as he drove me home. He kept saying, "I'm sorry, I'm

sorry,” and the more I heard that, the more I started to hate him.

The trip home felt like an eternity and when he dropped me off, I quickly ran into my bedroom and screamed hysterically at the top of my lungs. I had no doubt that my scream must have woken up the entire neighborhood. Peter stayed in his car after hearing the scream and just stared at the house. A few minutes later, he drove away. I cried nonstop for hours and even though my parents did try to go through the motions of consoling me, nothing seemed to help. My mother, who predicted that Peter and I would get married, was even shocked and disappointed. That was one of the longest, hurtful evenings of my life. When I went back to Pediatrics to continue my volunteer work, to my amazement, over the next few days, Peter continued to follow me around the clinic. I thought that perhaps he'd had a change of heart and sent Mary home. I was angry at myself that I couldn't stop loving him even after his deception. He finally asked me out to dinner, and I accepted. Because he stayed off the subject of Mary and talked about everything else, I thought that he had broken his marriage plans. After dinner, we kissed goodnight -- it was ecstatic as always. We continued to hug and when we broke apart, Peter told me that he'd talk to me soon, so I was very hopeful that our relationship would be back on track. However, when he didn't show up at the clinic for the next couple of weeks, I was worried about his absence. I asked one of his colleagues if they knew where he was, and they replied, "Peter hurt his back." Later, another associate informed me that he'd married Mary and spent his honeymoon flat on his back due to a back injury. I saw Peter in the hall a month later, and he claimed that he strained his back really badly when he kissed me that night. All I could think was, "You made your bed, now you have to lie in it!"

Peter continued to come in and out of my life for many years. His timing was never right and the weaknesses in his character became more apparent as each time he made promises he couldn't keep. During my most difficult times he didn't offer any help, but kept professing his undying love for me -- it was disgusting. As always, Peter was all talk with nothing to back up his words. The one person my mother had insisted that I go out with ended up hurting me more than anyone else in my whole life. Because of this profound misdirection, I decided not to listen to her ever again.

By this time, I had completed my Master's degree. Having graduated the highest in my class after completing my orals and thesis, I was offered a teaching position in the graduate department at California Lutheran University. What would have been a blessing to anyone else was not to me. Still being in my early twenties with little life experience, I was miserable and depressed. Without hesitation, I politely refused and once again, my parents were completely disgusted, accusing me of throwing away a golden opportunity and wasting their money. Just after I received my Master's degree, I tossed it into the back seat of my car without a second thought. I was grateful to have it, but I really didn't want to become an educator like my parents. I'd always had an interest in acting, modeling, or some other aspect of the entertainment industry. But, according to my mother, these fields were only for sluts, so I was never allowed to discuss this and pursuing these interests was definitely out of the question.

Beth and I continued to volunteer together. We used to go to the UCLA recreation center to swim and suntan to break up our volunteer days. One day, I decided to go to the recreation center by myself. As I sat by the pool dangling my feet in the water, out of the corner of my eye I saw this gigantic creature effortlessly swimming across the length of this Olympic size pool. It was amazing that it only took a couple of strokes to get from one side to the other. I kept staring at him because I couldn't believe my eyes. This extremely tall man left the pool and withdrew to the far side of the recreation center. As time went on, I would see him enter the recreation center, continually retreating to his own remote corner. I felt sorry that he was always alone and eventually went over to him, sat down, and introduced myself.

He turned out to be Lou Alcindor, later known as Kareem Abdul Jabbar. Kareem explained to me that people were intimidated by his size (he's over seven feet tall), and that made him feel very much alone. As the summer continued, Kareem always came over to see me before withdrawing to his

corner. His monstrous size never ceased to amaze me and when we'd sit side-by-side, his legs extended out so much further than mine. I'm five feet eight inches and never considered myself to be short, but when you're near a guy as tall as Kareem, anyone would feel like a shrimp. When we walked together, since I came up between his hips and his shoulders, my neck would get stiff because I'd have to look up so far just to talk to him. Since Kareem spoke in a very soft voice, I had to strain to hear what was saying. In time, I introduced him to everyone I knew at the recreation center, and he started feeling very comfortable around them. By the end of the summer, he thanked me for giving him one of the best summers he'd ever had.

About a year later, I went back to the recreation center at UCLA and was dangling my feet in the pool. All of a sudden, someone tapped me on the shoulder and when I looked up, I was surprised to see that it was Kareem. He had remembered the previous summer and once again thanked me for introducing him to so many people, making his summer so enjoyable. In return for my kindness, Kareem invited me to his basketball games. He said, "You can get in free by letting them know at the gate that you are a special guest of mine." Even though I was not an avid basketball fan, I was deeply touched by his friendly gesture, and never forgot it.

Mirror of Fear

While spending time at the UCLA recreation center, I met another man named Carl, who changed my life forever. I loved to watch him out of the corner of my eye while he was sun tanning with his friend Allen, a law student at UCLA. Carl's good looks took my breath away and I couldn't believe that someone could be that handsome! His Adonis-type physical appearance with his finely-sculpted face, shiny straight blond hair, and a sexy cleft in his chin topped off by piercing blue eyes, were absolutely breath-taking. A lot of other women also admired Carl and I was extremely flattered when he made it a point to suntan next to me! Having spent his first couple of years at the University of California at Berkeley, he was a true rebel with anti-societal beliefs. I admired his rebellious spirit because it was completely opposite to anything I had ever known, and he was the antithesis of the type of man my mother wanted for me. Carl's vibrant personality woke up something inside of me that had been sleeping for a long time.

We enjoyed long conversations at the recreation center joking, laughing, and thoroughly enjoying each other's company. He lived in the coed dorms at UCLA and since I had never been to a dorm, I was curious to see what dorm life was all about. When Carl finally invited me to go to his room, I eagerly accepted. As we walked down the halls, I loved the friendly feeling and enjoyed seeing all the interesting, original decorations. When we got to Carl's area, the first thing that impressed me was the large, plush green plants that he had placed all around his room. I loved to take care of plants, so I immediately took on the responsibility for keeping them watered. Being so naïve, I didn't understand why Carl got upset when I trimmed the leaves and threw the trimmings away. I later found out that all these luscious plants turned out to be marijuana. Smoking dope was a delight to Carl not only because it relaxed him, but he also really enjoyed the buzz he got off of the weed. I tried smoking a joint a couple of times, but didn't enjoy it as much as Carl. I never pursued smoking marijuana, but was happy that he loved it so much. His free spirit gave me a feeling of freedom and comfort, and as we continued seeing each other, we eventually fell in love.

I was twenty-four years old when I finally got the courage to give into my sexual feelings and Carl was the man for me! As a virgin, I had no previous sexual experience, so when Carl and I had sex for the first time, I was happy because it was painless. I didn't have an orgasm, but I didn't care because I was exhilarated that I'd finally had sex. Afterwards, I thought I had done something wrong because Carl seemed kind of quiet and started to withdraw. Reluctantly, he confided that he was very

self-conscious that he had a small penis. I put my arms around him and held him, reassuring him that it didn't matter because I loved him so much. He continued to explain that because of his small size it was difficult for him to have an orgasm with most women, but he was ecstatic about being able to climax in me. Over time, Carl became more and more possessive because he had a lot of pride about being the one who took my virginity, and I satisfied him where others couldn't.

Because I loved Carl so much, I couldn't stand being away from him. Even though my commute from Los Angeles to Thousand Oaks was tedious, we took advantage of every moment that we had to be together. We were never able to spend an entire night together, and my parents' curfews were becoming more and more ridiculous. They met Carl once very briefly, and par for the course, labeled him as "a brilliant young man who was brain damaged from all the drugs he had taken." But this time, nothing was going to keep me away from Carl, not even my parents' threats or their cruel and constant psychological analysis of him. So, Beth and I decided it was time to strategically plan my getaway. Can you imagine, a twenty-four year-old woman running away from home? I knew my parents' schedule and planned things accordingly. On the chosen day, Beth and I drove her parents' station wagon to Thousand Oaks to pack up all my possessions. My sister, who was twenty-five years old, timidly hid in her room; she didn't want anything to do with this situation. We quietly put all my things into Beth's car which took a couple of hours. Feeling upset that my sister never came out of her room, I decided not to leave a note. As Beth and I drove away, I tried to focus on a new beginning.

Carl had just moved out of the dorm, so I moved into his new apartment in Culver City. It had three bedrooms and he was sharing it with two other guys. As long as I paid a little extra rent, which I agreed to do, his roommates didn't seem to mind having me around. Only one of the guys had a little problem with Carl and me living together, as he professed to be a devout Christian who didn't approve of that sort of thing. According to him, we were going against the Bible because we were living together out of wedlock. As fate would have it, this roommate eventually fell in love with my friend Beth and hypocritically lived with her before they were married. His religious double standards put a serious rift in my friendship with Beth later on.

At this time, Carl had graduated from UCLA and we were both looking for jobs. After a month of living with Carl, old fears started haunting me as this was my first real experience being on my own away from home. My mother words wreaked havoc with my emotions as she would always say, "One day you'll get very sick and we are the only ones who will be able to help you. No one else can understand you because you are different." These statements plagued my mind and I started getting weird physical symptoms because I was wondering if they could be true. With my fears heightening, I became overwhelmed as my anxiety began to batter me mentally and physically. Living in my mother's guilt and fear-ridden shadows, I started experiencing difficulty breathing for no apparent reason. Becoming increasingly aware of each breath and every heartbeat my chest and upper back felt tighter and tighter. This finally got so severe that I was afraid to do anything. I visited a doctor at UCLA who diagnosed me with PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.) The doctor explained that primarily soldiers of wars that have been under extreme stress suffered from this condition. This diagnosis was not a consolation and my fears worsened. It got to a point where I became too frightened to drive because I thought I was going to die at any given moment. Beth volunteered to take me to work every day, reassuring me that I was going to be okay. At night, she'd sit by my bed trying to help me fall asleep while Carl was at work. My mother had literally controlled my every breath, and now I was almost afraid to live without her. I became more and more fearful of my day-to-day existence and was no longer able to function in normal society. I didn't know where to begin to help myself as I had no confidence, nor an awareness of my own independence or inner strength. Once again, I lived in sheer terror.

Carl casually shrugged things off because he was too young to understand such a difficult situation. He did his best to try to console me, but his continued possessiveness made me even more

insecure. My close friendship with Beth drove him crazy because I spent so much time with her, but she was the only person I felt I could trust and depend on. At one point, Carl became so infuriated that he threatened to cut the phone cord out of the wall to keep me from calling Beth, announcing that he would scare Beth away with a knife the next time she visited. The moment a chance presented itself, I called Beth to warn her about Carl's intimidating behavior. I seemed to have gone from the fire into the frying pan, from one controlling individual to another, from one nightmare to the next; my life was like a horrible dream. Thank God Beth and I continued our relationship away from Carl. She was the only source of stability I had in my "topsy turvy" world.

Eventually, I got enough confidence to secure a job as a bank teller. One day after work, as I was walking up to our apartment, to my horror, a U-Haul trailer was attached to the back of my car. My knees buckled under me and my heart raced so hard that I could hardly breathe. Without my permission or knowledge, Carl had packed up all our things and put them in this trailer. He boldly announced, "We are leaving for Oregon," and continued by saying, "I am taking you away from everybody, so it will be just you and me without interference!" I was horrified that this raving maniac was now taking total control of my life -- I just felt like dying! Everything I owned was in his possession and I was so numb that I didn't know what to do. Reluctantly, I called my job to let them know that I wouldn't be coming back and just went along with Carl's plan. We left so quickly that I didn't even have a chance to say good bye to Beth.

The trip was grueling trip as we drove for hours on end from Southern California to Oregon barely taking a break because Carl was so determined to get me out of California. I was so frightened and paralyzed inside that I lost my appetite, and all I could do was constantly drank Coca Cola; the caffeine and sugar high seemed to help sustain me. By the time we reached Oregon, I was in such a state of shock, my body could barely move.

Feelings of isolation, loneliness, and fear heightened to the point where I began entertaining thoughts of suicide. But, as I continued to think about it, I came to the conclusion that I had to survive this situation. I realized that if I committed suicide, my mother would have won and I was determined not to let that happen. Carl asked me to call some apartments listed in the telephone book. I thought of calling Beth, but I knew there was nothing she could do to help me. After going through the motions of making some calls, I lied to Carl by telling him that nothing was available; most of the time, I never even made the call. After a couple of days, Carl was frustrated with not being able to find a place to live and decided that it was time to head back to California. I was so relieved and could only think about was being back with Beth to feel somewhat safe again. We drove non-stop from Oregon to his parents place in Beaumont, California. Being totally exhausted from the trip, we slept for hours. When I woke up, Carl was still sleeping. I made an instant decision to get away from him as soon as possible because I didn't know what he was going to do next. I quietly called a friend from our former apartment complex asking if I could stay with her temporarily. She responded by saying, "Yes." Thank God! I would have loved to stay with Beth, but since she lived with her parents, I knew that was not a possibility. A lot of my things were still packed in the U-Haul, but I didn't care. I hastily packed a suitcase and hopped on a bus headed back to Culver City.

Feeling severely depressed, disoriented, and terribly run down I eventually became agoraphobic, no longer being able to leave my friend's apartment. I depended on her to get my food with the little savings had left. Luckily, she understood my sensitive condition. A couple of weeks later, Carl called, informing me that he would come to Culver City with my car and the rest of my belongings. He sounded a lot more rested and much calmer. We agreed on a time to meet. When he showed up at my friend's apartment, he gave me a big hug and started to cry. He expressed how much he missed me and that he would do whatever it took to get us back together. But, still exhausted from this entire experience, I told him that I heeded some time to myself. Carl stated, "I will wait for you forever," and sadly went to the bus stop and hopped on a bus taking him back home.

My weakened condition along with my intense feelings of isolation and depression worsened. My

parents' old subconscious programs once again overtook my emotions and caused complete self-doubt. Being in such a despondent physical and mental state, I finally broke down and called them as a last resort. When I heard my mother's voice on the phone, I quivered and grit my teeth with her "I told you so" attitude. She consented to letting me move back into their home in Thousand Oaks. It was horrible going back to the "old prison," but I felt that I was doing the right thing – all things considered. After I moved back, the agoraphobia worsened. The Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome had taken a toll as sometimes my breathing would be so labored that I'd have to go into the bathroom and provoke myself to vomit in order to relax, enabling me to breathe normally again.

Months passed and I began to hate the human vegetable I'd become. One day, it seemed like I was struck by lightning because I realized that I was the only one who could pick myself up by the bootstraps. I had no one else to rely on as my parents felt that I was hopeless. So, I decided to take myself to a chiropractor named Dr. Janet Buc. She knew my family history and I was able to make an appointment that same day. Dr. Buc knew me when I was younger and I always felt comfortable with her. When I told her about my symptoms, she smiled and said, "Honey, it sounds like you have a pinched nerve." My eyes lit up and I wondered if the answer could be so simple after all these months of suffering. Were my parents totally wrong by telling me all these years that this was all in my head, and that no one could ever understand and help me but them? Upon examination, she found a severely pinched nerve in my upper back which she believed caused my breathing problems and chest tightness. To my utter amazement, her treatment made me feel so much better immediately, and after a couple more treatments, I felt back to myself for the first time in such a long while. As a result, I became a devout chiropractic fan. Because I was feeling so much better, I assumed a more positive attitude, and it was amazing how quickly the agoraphobia went away as I started to take control of my life. The fact that I listened to my own intuition and found my own answer without parental guidance gave me the inner strength I needed to move forward.

By this time, since I had lived away for a while, my parents were no longer as strict with me. Cara had finally moved out of their home and was living in Santa Monica while working for the Rand Corporation. She actually had gotten the courage to get her own place shortly after I moved out to be with Carl, but we didn't stay close. I took a job as a secretary and very soon became able to acquire an apartment with a roommate. Finally, I was living in my own space and financially supporting myself. My day to day existence became a comfortable routine, enabling me to spend time doing things that I really enjoyed. Almost a year passed and suddenly I heard from Carl! This call shocked me as I had put that part of my life behind me and never really thought about him. Carl explained that the reason he had behaved so erratically was due to a stomach ulcer that a doctor had recently diagnosed. He claimed that the pain from this ulcer had caused him to overreact to things and he kept apologizing profusely for his mistreatment. He also let me know that he had given up smoking pot and continued to profess his undying love for me. Since Carl was the first and only man that I had ever made love to, I felt that it was important to see him again.

Subsequently, he drove up to Thousand Oaks to see me a few days later; it was like we had never been apart. We hugged and kissed for a couple of hours. All the past negative experiences seemed to slip away and with my newfound strength and his positive changes, we really enjoyed each other's company. To top this off, Carl dropped down on one knee, looked me in the eyes, and asked me for my hand in marriage. Without hesitating, I said, "Yes." When I told my parents about our engagement, they felt that I was finally doing the right thing because I had slept with him and this would take me out of the category of being a slut. A few days later, they located a preacher to perform a quick ceremony in a church around the corner from their house. With Beth by my side, wearing a borrowed dress, I nervously took the vows. After the ceremony, Carl and I took a long drive to Costa Mesa and stayed in a hotel until we found an apartment to rent. As soon as we signed the new apartment lease, I took it upon myself to drive to Thousand Oaks and gather up all my

belongings since he was busy completing his Master's in Business Administration at the University of California in Irvine. It was very exciting to think that I was finally going to live in a place that just belonged to Carl and me. A job opening came up in the Physical Education Department at the university where Carl attended, so I decided to take the job to give us an extra income. Carl never told his parents that we got married because he felt that they would cut him off from the money they were sending him for school, and he wanted to continue his education without interruption. This deception always bothered me, but I knew there was nothing I could do to change his mind.

Just as I was leaving work one day, I got a call from my parents telling me that my grandmother was dying in the hospital. I felt guilty because I knew that I should have kept in closer contact with her. I immediately called the hospital and asked for my grandmother's room. She answered the phone in a very frail voice, and when she realized it was me, she perked right up. As I hid my tearfulness, I apologized profusely for not visiting her on a regular basis. I told her that I wanted to drive to Thousand Oaks so I could spend some time with her and she responded by saying, "I don't want you to see me this way." My heart broke and all I could say was, "I love you so much grandma. I will call you in the morning to see how you are feeling." When she said goodbye, it left an empty feeling in my soul. Because I was so worried, I tossed and turned all night because I loved her so much. She had been the only family member that ever brought any joy into my life and I was so grateful to her for that – she meant the world to me. Sure enough, the next morning I got the news from my parents that she passed away in her sleep. I was devastated and my guilt feelings for not having seen her before she died plagued me for a long time. Two days later, Carl and I drove up to Los Angeles where a small family funeral was held at a Jewish cemetery. Carl was so kind and gentle, keeping his arms around me as I couldn't hold back my tears; I truly appreciated his understanding and sensitivity. As we drove back after the funeral, all I could do was talk to her in my head, reiterating how much I loved her over and over again. To my surprise, when I went back to work the following day, the Physical Education Department fired me for taking time off to attend my grandmother's funeral. I couldn't believe that they could do such a heartless thing! I packed up my office drawers without saying a word and quietly walked out. Carl went on to graduate as the top student in his class with a Master's in Business Administration, and I was so proud of him!

However, his old possessiveness and paranoia quickly resurfaced and Carl forbade me to speak to anyone but him, even threatening me with a knife during an argument. I had initiated a modeling career, but Carl became jealous of my time away, envisioning me having sex with the photographers. In one of his rages, he burned my photographs thus ending my career. Realizing that things were becoming more and more dangerous, I wanted a divorce. I didn't know how to tell him because I was afraid that he'd get violent, so I convinced Carl to drive us up to Thousand Oaks so that we could visit my parents. There, I would be able to ask him for a divorce on "safe ground." He agreed to the drive and when we arrived at my parent's home, I asked Carl to wait in the car. He knew that my parents were weird, so he didn't mind staying behind. I ran inside the house asking my parents for their support and assistance after quickly explaining my delicate situation to them. I was completely shattered by their response when Mother informed me that she didn't want Carl in their house because they couldn't stand his "vibes." She went on to offer the floor of my grandmother's house as a great place for us to sleep for the night. My life was in danger, and all they could say was that Carl and I should be grateful to stay at my grandmother's house, which was empty with no furniture. Mother reassured me that the new plush carpeting would keep us comfortable, and that this was the best they could do for me. I just couldn't believe my ears and I left without saying a word. I was hoping that they had changed through the years, but they seemed worse than ever.

That night, I was on pins and needles doing everything possible to keep Carl calm. After sleeping on my grandmother's floor, Carl and I drove back to Costa Mesa and I never told him that I wanted a divorce because my parents didn't back me up properly. As we drove back, a light quarrel turned into an ugly fight. He threatened a lot of horrible things, but thank God, he didn't follow through. A

couple of days later, I just couldn't take it any longer, so I packed up my things while he was in school and left the apartment before he came home. My sister wouldn't let me stay with her in Santa Monica since she was not into sharing her space with anybody, not even me. So, I stayed in a one bedroom apartment with another friend in Los Angeles, and slept on her couch. I didn't hear from Carl for about a week after I left. Finally, he started calling and begged me to come back. He drove up to Los Angeles a couple of time to try to persuade me to rethink our relationship, but I stood my ground. He finally moved into an apartment complex in Irvine, which he shared with two other guys.

I eventually moved back to Orange County, rented a room in a place that was not far from Carl, and obtained a job with an insurance company as a claims adjuster. A couple of months after the move, I developed a high fever that continued for eleven days. Worried that I was not able to break the fever, I called my parents, asking if they could come out and help me. They responded by saying, "It's not fair to expose us to your illness because it's probably contagious." I was so angry that I filled the bathtub with ice and jumped in for as long as I could stand it. Wow, was that painful! Then, I proceeded to put on some sweats, wrapped myself in a heavy blanket, and went to sleep. In the morning, I woke up to find that my sweats and blankets were drenched, and was elated that I had finally broken the fever! When I returned to work, to my surprise, they actually gave me a raise in my salary. They also let me work part-time for a couple of weeks until I felt well enough to work full-time. With Carl so close by, I would stay with him every now and then, and we continued to have a sexual relationship. Not having been with any other men, I felt safe with him. We were still legally married, and after about a year, I realized that this was not a healthy situation and things had to change in order for us both to move forward with our lives.

Mustering enough courage to go to a bookstore, I purchased a book on "Do It Yourself Divorce." After spending about a week reading the material, I carefully filled out the divorce paperwork. I knew that the hard part of this process would be to get Carl to sign these papers to make it official. When I finally gathered up the nerve to present them to him, he was amazingly calm. But, his signing them was conditional and he made me promise two things: first, that I would never mail the final papers and we would always remain legally separated for the rest of our lives, and second, that I would continue to sleep with him. I agreed to these promises just to get him to sign the papers because I didn't want him to revoke this dissolution. Everything continued as normal for the next six months, but as soon as the clock struck midnight at the final hour, I mailed in the final divorce documents. When Carl received the finalization in the mail, he didn't get angry because I continued to see him and for some strange reason, we were getting along better than ever. Carl provided a sense of familiarity and even though we had gone through so much, it was difficult for me to leave him.

However, the minute my parents found out that our divorce was final, they no longer put my name on the family Christmas cards. In their minds, no member of their family ever got a divorce. They were ashamed of me and this hurt me very deeply. I began to feel like I was getting into a rut again and that my relationship with Carl would lead to a dead-end, so I decided to make a move. One day, I left Carl a note saying that I was moving to San Francisco, one of his favorite places because it was near Berkeley, and that I would contact him as soon as I got settled. I didn't want to hurt him and felt that this was the best way out. Feeling lost and depressed, I went back to Thousand Oaks because of the familiarity and moved in with another friend, a fashion model named Karen.

Photo Finish

Shortly after settling into Karen's condo, my parents asked me if I would model for a brochure which exhibited their upside down exercise apparatus that was invented by my father. They claimed

that this piece of equipment was the first of its kind and they were ready to bring it to the open market. I consented to being the model because I'd always dreamed of becoming a model, and felt that this could give me some exposure. They hired Ron who had a vast photographic background. As a young, artsy, soft-spoken photographer, he owned a store where people could develop their own prints. I took an immediate liking to him and thought he was so cute! The photo shoot was very grueling, lasting four days. Barely taking a break, my parents rushed the shoot just to "get the job done." I was expected to pose, holding the different exercise positions for what seemed like forever. Ron was very kind and saw that I was being heavily overworked, so he kept trying to slow the pace down. Unfortunately, his efforts didn't help me. At the end of the final photo session, I collapsed from exhaustion and couldn't get out of bed for three days.

I retired to Karen's condo. At that time, I was dating Perry, a millionaire who enjoyed his material possessions and flaunted his wealth; money was his God. My parents liked the fact that Perry was rich and successful because that's all that mattered to them. Perry had just popped the marriage question and I told him that I needed time to think about it. I never told my parents that our relationship had progressed to that point because I didn't want their pressure to get married.

One evening, I got a phone call from my parents who told me that Ron had called them to find out where I lived so he could ask me out on a date. Reluctantly, they gave me his telephone number, demanding that I refuse to go out with him. I was twenty seven years old at that time and they were still trying to control my life! They stated, "He's too young for you," and told me that Ron was only eighteen. Furthermore, they warned me that, "If you go out with him, it will destroy the family business." They added, "If you accept this date, we will disown you." I couldn't believe what I had just heard! They obviously hadn't learned that their idle threats were no longer effective with me. And, why would a relationship with Ron hurt the family business? That didn't make sense at all. I took a day to calm myself down and enjoyed a long walk in a nearby park. Feeling a refreshing gentle breeze, I sat on a bench under a beautiful oak tree as it felt good just to be alone with my thoughts. That night, I finally decided to call Ron and declined his invitation because I didn't want to go out with someone who was just eighteen. When I told him that he was just too young for me, he asked, "How old do you think I am?" I replied "Eighteen." Ron laughed and said, "No, I am twenty-two, where did you get that idea?" It was par for the course that my parents would lie about his age so I wouldn't go out with him. I felt better that he was a little older than I was told, but still being six years younger made me feel a little uneasy since my upbringing did not condone being with a younger man. I let Ron know that I would "think about" his invitation.

Ron remained very confident and said, "I hope you decide to meet me at the Conejo Ice Rink Thursday night." I responded by saying, "I'll see," and he said, "I'll be expecting you." He was an avid ice hockey player on a semi-pro team and practiced regularly at that skating rink. Well, I had a few decisions to make. Perry had just asked me to marry him, my parents threatened to disown me, and Ron was waiting with open arms. I felt like I had the weight of the world on my shoulders with these decisions, but I knew I had to be true to my heart. After much thought, I called Perry Thursday morning and was agitated by his cocky attitude and the arrogant sound of his voice. I blurted out, "Stuff your money where the sun doesn't shine." I realized that he was the opposite of what I was looking for in a man as he did not have the sensitivity and understanding that I craved so much. I abruptly ended our relationship. That night, I drove to the ice rink, parked my car, and was too nervous to go inside. Instead, I paced back and forth in front of the entrance trying to decide if I was doing the right thing; after a while, I finally went in. Ron had just finished his ice hockey game and I was very surprised that he was waiting for me to walk through the door. As I entered the rink, he stepped towards me and gave me a big hug. I melted into his arms and it was like we had known each other for a long time. Ron definitely seemed like the right choice. Unlike the stress I felt with Carl and his controlling personality, Ron relaxed me as we talked for a while and then decided to go for a drive. We hopped into Ron's Porsche Boxster, dropped off my car at Karen's condo, and continued

driving into the sunset towards the beach. I thoroughly enjoyed every moment as Ron proudly showed me some of his favorite places that he loved to photograph. We parked at different beautiful viewpoints kissing on and off throughout the night. I treasured every second as he continued to melt my heart. The next morning, Ron dropped me off and continued on his way home to Agoura Hills. As I entered Karen's condo, I came into an unexpected nightmare. Somehow, my parents found out that I had gone out with Ron and had called all of my girlfriends, ex-boyfriends, grilled my roommate, and even the police. I had dozens of crazy angry and threatening messages from them on my answering machine. Their outrageous behavior, which caused me complete embarrassment and humiliation, pushed me to my limit. I was absolutely livid when I picked up the phone to call them, but they immediately started screaming at the top of their lungs and wouldn't let me speak a word. I couldn't take their abuse anymore and finally yelled back "fuck off." For me to say those words to them was heartbreaking, but there was no alternative, I'd had enough.

Ron and his brother, Grey, came over the next day and helped me move my things out of Karen's condo into Ron's current residence, a large home in Agoura owned by Ron's father. Since his father also lived there, I asked Ron if his dad knew that I was moving in and he replied, "Yes." After we emptied the truck and put my belongings into Ron's bedroom, his dad walked into the room and asked, "What are all these things doing here?" I was completely embarrassed because I realized that Ron had not asked his father's permission for me to move in. I felt like crawling into a little hole and hiding. Ron then took his father to the side and explained to him that this was just temporary and to please bear with us. His father was not happy about this situation which he felt was forced upon him without proper consent. This incident got us off to a bad start, which was never fully resolved because, in his dad's mind, we began our relationship on the wrong foot. He held a grudge against me, and never let it go. If I had known Ron's father had no idea that I was moving in, I would have never gone through with this transition. Despite his grumpy dad, Ron and I made the best of this imperfect situation. I bonded very strongly with his dog, an Australian Shepherd named Yetto, who took a tremendous liking to me. Ron's mother had died of cancer a few months earlier and Yetto was very close to her. I was the first woman to live in the house after his mother's death and Yetto constantly stayed by my side. Ron's brother, Grey, who also lived in the house, had his own set of problems being overweight, irresponsible, partying to excess, and suffered from an identity crisis.

After we were settled, Ron finally sent my parents a bill for his photographic services for their brochure. We were shocked when, instead of paying the bill, they responded by accusing him of overcharging when he had simply asked for the amount that they had agreed upon before the shoot. My parents were not open to negotiation and only paid part of Ron's bill. My four days of hard work was not even a consideration and once again, it was their way or the highway. Ron and I just had to let this go because they were being so unreasonable and we really didn't want to hassle with this unfairness any further.

Previous to Ron, Carl and I took chances sexually by not using contraception, and luckily, I never became pregnant. This made me think that there was something wrong with me. When Ron told me that he had a low sperm count due to a childhood illness, and couldn't get a woman pregnant, we determined that contraception was not necessary. But, the very first time we made love, I got pregnant! I began vomiting almost non-stop and when Ron's father asked what was wrong with me I told him, "I just have a bad flu." Even though Ron and I had a deeply committed relationship and really loved each other, we mutually agreed that an abortion would be the best answer since we were not in a situation to support a child.

Soon after researching different abortion clinics, we found one in Ventura that had a good reputation. After calling for an appointment, a few days later, Ron drove me to the clinic. I sat in the waiting room with about fifteen other women. It felt like a "cattle call," but I appreciated the professionalism and kindness of the staff. When my turn came up, I dressed in their gown and got up on the table. As I lay back, I could see nature pictures posted on the ceiling – I guess they were put

there to relax you during the procedure. I was very apprehensive as they inserted an instrument into me, causing the same harsh cramps that I got with my periods. The entire procedure was very short, and afterwards, they led me to a bed where I was instructed to rest for a few minutes before leaving. I endured the entire procedure without anesthesia because we couldn't afford it. Oddly enough, I didn't have the complications that some of the girls who used the anesthesia suffered. Having heard other horror stories about abortions, gratitude filled my soul as I recovered quickly and in fact, never suffered from the severe cramping and late periods that I used to have ever again; my system worked like clockwork!! Part of me really regretted having to do this because I always wanted a child, but I knew I had done the right thing.

At this time, Ron's father had remarried and moved into a new home with his wife. A few months later, Ron and I moved into our own place, but Ron's brother stayed as he had offered to watch his father's house. I was happy to get away from Grey's constant partying and irresponsible ways, but sad to leave Yetto, the Australian Shepherd that I had grown so close to. Even though our new apartment was only twenty minutes away from his father's home, it broke my heart that they didn't allow pets. It was a very quiet complex with a lot of older residents. We spent the evenings that Robert wasn't playing ice hockey just holding each other, talking, and watching television.

During the following months, I had two premonitions at two separate times urging me to go to the West Valley Animal Shelter. I listened to these feelings and drove to the shelter where she happened to be both times. It seemed as though we had some kind of psychic communication between us. On my first visit to the shelter, Yetto was labeled as a Cocker Spaniel and very ill. I didn't recognize her because of this strange label, so she whimpered loudly try to get my attention. When I realized it was her, I started to cry because I couldn't stand seeing her in this dismal situation. I signed the necessary release documents and brought her back to our pet-banning apartment where Ron and I carefully nursed her back to health. Begrudgingly, after two weeks, I had to return her to Ron's brother, Grey, who still lived in his father's house in Agoura. One month later, I followed my gut feelings and went to the animal shelter to find Yetto there once again! This time, I absolutely refused to take her back to Grey because I knew this little dog was downright miserable due to Grey's improper care. Ron and I ended up secretly sneaking Yetto in and out of our apartment in his ice hockey bag for an entire year. However, one day, a nosey neighbor reported me to the apartment managers saying, "She is carrying something in and out of her apartment that looks like it is in the shape of a dog." When the landlord called to question us, we denied everything but realized that our luck for sneaking her in and out had dried up; it was time to move. At that time, it was difficult to locate an apartment that accepted pets. Finally, we found one, but it was not situated in a good area, but we loved Yetto so much that we were willing to do anything for her. She was like our child and became my best friend for many years. Because of her uncanny intelligence and intuitiveness, I was able to take her everywhere, even to work at times. We became inseparable.

Ron continued to play ice hockey and we traveled to ice rinks throughout California for his games. One day, back at the ice rink in Thousand Oaks, I was sitting on the bleachers and felt someone staring at me. I looked up and to my amazement it was Kurt Russell! We looked at each other for a moment and then he started to giggle. I wasn't sure if he recognized me, but judging from his response there was a good chance that he did. I blushed heavily out of embarrassment, as any woman would at the sight of Kurt Russell, and quickly skirted away without looking back. I continued to see him at the ice rink from time to time, but always avoided any contact with him. I still lacked confidence and didn't want anything to get in the way of my relationship with Ron, not even Kurt Russell.

Ice hockey is a very dangerous and aggressive sport where someone always gets hurt. I attended most of Ron's games, but during the one game that I missed due to fatigue, Ron got severely hurt. I went to bed early that night because I felt like I needed some extra sleep. The phone rang two o'clock in the morning and I answered half awake. When Ron's coach informed me that Ron had a bad

accident, my heart started pounding so hard in my chest that I could barely hear the rest of the conversation. The coach asked that I meet them as soon as possible, so in a total panic, I drove quickly to the hospital. Upon entering the emergency room, I saw Ron lying on a hospital bed. I almost fainted when I saw a bone sticking out from his severely dislocated shoulder. Even though the doctor had given him medication for his pain, I could see the suffering in his face. I sat with him for a couple of hours waiting for the doctor came in. When the doctor arrived, he told us that a surgery was scheduled for ten o'clock the next morning. He felt that it would be best to keep Ron overnight and instructed me to go home and get some sleep. I didn't want to leave him and would have been content sleeping on the chair next to his bed, but I followed their instructions.

The next morning, by the time I arrived at the hospital, Ron had been given painkillers and sedatives to get him ready for surgery. I watched as they pushed his bed into the surgery room and restlessly paced the hallways during the operation. Thankfully, the operation was very successful and after a week stay in the hospital, I took Ron home. He needed many weeks of intensive care which caused a tremendous financial hardship because he could no longer work. I wasn't working at the time and our finances were draining rapidly. And, Ron required so much care, that I couldn't leave him to find a job as I was barely able to leave the apartment even to buy food. When we called his father, he didn't offer a thing even though he was very financially secure. His dad was angry at me for protecting Ron's deceased mother's belongings which were still at his house in Agoura, and that was all he could think about. Ron's recent surgery didn't seem important to him. Previously, when I had gone to check on Yetto, I saw that all his mother's precious things had been tossed all around the house. I found out that Grey, Ron's brother, was selling all her jewelry, silverware, etc., to buy drugs. I tried to pack what was left of her more expensive items in boxes to give to Ron's sister before Grey could sell everything. Ron appreciated what I was trying to do, but his father didn't. Ron's father felt that I was interfering with something that wasn't any of my business and was in total denial about Grey's continuing drug problem. Despite our hardships, and without his father's help, Ron still recovered. He was finally able to return to work and immediately received a two week assignment in San Diego. However, I came down with acute bronchitis because I had depleted myself taking care of Ron. I was very touched when Ron insisted on commuting back and forth every day from San Diego to Woodland Hills, which was at least a two to three hour drive, to take care of me because I was bedridden and far too weak to take care of myself. No one had ever done anything so caring for me before, and this made me love Ron so much more. Thanks to his love and care, I was finally able to get back on my feet.

After living together for two and a half years, Ron and I married. The beautiful outdoor wedding took place in a colorful, sweet-smelling rose garden. A lot of Ron's friends, family, and hockey team members attended the ceremony. The only two people that I invited were my chiropractor, Dr. Janet Buc (who had previously fixed my pinched nerve), and her husband, Richard. They both stood by my side, substituting for my parents during the service. I had not informed my parents about our wedding because I was so happy that they were not in my life. My new marriage with Ron was a far cry from the one I had with Carl, who kept me in a constant state of stress and paranoia. Ron made me feel peaceful and relaxed. For our honeymoon, we took a week off, driving up the beautiful California Coast on the Pacific Coast Highway to San Francisco. We stopped off at San Luis Obispo, San Simeon (the home of the Hearst Castle), Monterrey, and Carmel (the home of the Eastwood's), on the way to Frisco. It was a great honeymoon and we loved being together.

However, even with Ron's gentle love, I still experienced many self-doubts, and was always soul-searching for many unanswered questions. Suffering from ongoing nightmares, I continued to agonize over a debilitating fear of my parents which left me with uncomfortable physical symptoms and chronic exhaustion. One day, I found an advertisement in the newspaper for a ten dollar psychic reading. I felt so desperate that I decided to make an appointment. This "psychic" woman, who called herself Kathy, seemed perceptive enough to pick up my major fears and told me that my parents had

actually cast a spell on me which only she could help me break. Already living in such terror of my parents, I believed her story. I continued to see her regularly and she kept asking for more and more money for different things she needed to do to “free me from my parents once and for all.” After a little time passed, she stated, “I have discovered that you are adopted and I personally have met your real parents.” Elated to hear this, for the first time in my life, I thought I finally understood why my parents were so cruel to me; I wasn’t their biological child! For months thereafter, Kathy strung me along by saying that I couldn’t meet Jean, my real mother, until the whole spell from my fake parents was lifted which would require additional money and ongoing visits. She stated, “The money must come from you because I need your energy on it to successfully eliminate the spell from your parents.” I ended up giving her thousands of dollars, a car, furniture, etc., so she could break this spell put on me by my “fake” parents, and then, when this spell was broken, I could finally meet my “real” ones.

Kathy finally informed me that she was going to move to Huntington Beach in Orange County. That was a long drive for me, but I continued to commute the distance just to see her. As time passed, she made it more and more difficult to contact her. I had already leased a car in my name for her to use because she promised to make the payments. Soon, I was contacted by the leasing company who reported that they hadn’t received a lease payment in three months. In fact, she never made one payment as she had promised. In total desperation, I called a detective who worked with the Orange County Police Department. This same detective informed me about “gypsy psychics” and let me know that other people had already placed numerous complaints against Kathy, which turned out not to be her real name. Furthermore, he explained that there was a whole clan of gypsy psychics on the West Coast with their central offices located in San Francisco. He had been trying to bust them for years and felt that my case would add fuel to the fire. I was ashamed that I had fallen for her outrageous scam and was very relieved when the detective not only retrieved the leased car, but gave us back a substantial amount of our money so Ron and I were able to begin repairing our damaged credit. Throughout this entire ordeal, Ron never protested or blamed me because he had believed this scam just as much as I had. I felt completely guilty because I brought this situation into our lives and worked diligently to repair all the agonizing damage this ordeal had caused us. Kathy and her family ended up abandoning their place in Huntington Beach, and they were never found.

Due to my many years of being a vegetarian, I constantly came down with the latest cold or flu because my immune system had been so severely compromised; I rarely felt healthy and energetic. Ron took me to the doctor for some blood tests which showed that I was severely anemic. He encouraged me to start eating red meat to properly balance my metabolism. So, I started by eating a piece of chicken which tasted like rubber, but I began to feel a little better. It took me an entire year to be able to eat a whole hamburger, and as I continued to eat red meat, my health finally began to improve!

Although Ron’s suggestion to eat red meat was helpful, we still disagreed on the concept of a proper diet. He was a devoted “junk food junkie” and couldn’t differentiate between high and low quality foods. Being opposite to him, I was raised on health foods and believed that you are what you eat. Subsequently, I would make two types of dishes at most of our meals -- one for him and one for me, but I didn’t mind because I loved him so much. Soon, a new and very painful physical symptom began to develop as I started to have a continuous burning in my bladder. Symptomatically, this was the opposite of a regular urinary tract infection. When I urinated the burning would go away, whereas with a normal bladder infection, it burns when you urinate. I visited a doctor who inserted a scope into my bladder to see what was wrong. I didn’t expect this to be such a painful procedure, and even after it was finished, I was in horrible pain for a week. It was very frustrating that the doctor couldn’t prescribe anything that could help me lessen this tremendous pain, so I had to endure it always being on the edge of tears, until it finally died down.

I was diagnosed with a condition called interstitial cystitis, a chronic, very painful bladder disease.

The lining of my bladder had become ulcerated due to highly acidic urine from all the years of stress and literally being “pissed off.” I believed that it was caused from all the nights I had to hold my urine in to avoid confrontation with my mother. However, I refused to accept the doctor’s prognosis that I was going to have a debilitating condition for the rest of my life, which was supposed to become increasingly worse in time. So, I immediately started researching the different acid and non-acid foods in the hopes of fully alkalinizing my body for less irritating urine, and put myself on a very strict diet to combat this painful condition. When Ron and I went out to eat, Ron typically became upset that I was so particular about my diet saying, “I can’t take you anywhere without you being so picky!” He just couldn’t understand that I was living with such a painful condition and I was fearful of it progressing any further. As time went on, I also found out that because I was severely rundown, I had systemic candida, hypoglycemia, parasites, allergies, and Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, which all contributed to the interstitial cystitis. For years, I tried different healing modalities, and with a lot of perseverance and determination, I was able to overcome all of these illnesses including the interstitial cystitis.

Later on, when I met Greg, as a chiropractor, he manually adjusted a certain spot in my spine which was directly related to the bladder. I found that whenever I became symptomatic from the interstitial cystitis, that bladder spot always needed to be realigned. I also went through a series of colonics and cleanses, along with Greg’s Personalized Nutrition Program. This more scientific approach helped me to finally understand my body type and its exact nutritional needs through the science of geno-metabolic typing and nonconventional ortho-molecular nutrition testing. Greg explained that given my Russian background, my blood type, endocrine pattern, physical, physiological, psychological constitutions, and most importantly, information from nutrition test results, pure vegetarianism was completely incompatible with my particular genetic structure. Unfortunately, even though I had started to eat meat, I needed this precise nutritional guidance to correct the problems caused by having been a vegetarianism for so long. He stated, “No two people are exactly alike,” and helped me realize how important it is to understand your own body chemistry. My parents’ “one-size-fits-all” nutrition mentality did not work and proved to wreak havoc on my system. Between the complete healing of my degenerative eye condition and the interstitial cystitis, I’ve had two medical miracles in my life for which I am eternally grateful.

Ron’s began working for Yashica Cameras and then progressed onto a better position with the Minolta Corporation. His behavior started to change and I determined that he was just not cut out to be a corporate person. Ron was truly an artist at heart that could not easily fit into the heavily structured pressure of a political corporate world. Both these corporate jobs required a lot of traveling and, even though I was able to go with him much of the time, the difference in his personality became apparent. As his depression worsened, he became increasingly introverted causing our communication to decline. During his spare time, he would watch the television for hours without saying a word. To help myself deal with Ron’s reclusive behavior, I began to write a diary. Writing became an outlet to help me deal with his depression as well as my own frustration about this situation.

One day, while I was sitting in the community apartment patio, a neighbor peeked over my shoulder to see what I was writing. He introduced himself as Dan and told me that he was a published songwriter. Dan became curious when he saw that my diary was written in a rhythmic, poetic form. When he asked if he could read a little, I shyly handed him my diary. After a few minutes, he said, “Oh, wow! Did you know that you are writing song lyrics?” I had no idea that I was actually writing lyrics – this came as such a total surprise! He went on to say, “You are extremely talented and should think about pursuing a career as a lyricist.” This hidden talent was definitely something I never knew even existed, and I honored the fact that Dan liked my writing so much. He informed me about a song competition and advised me to enter my lyrics, and I did. The lyric was called *No Longer Just You and Me*, which was based on my situation with Ron, and per Dan’s

request, I sent them immediately to the Nashville Songwriters Competition. This almost seemed ridiculous because I didn't think I really knew what I was doing, but I submitted them anyhow. I figured that if I was going to make a fool out of myself, I might as well do it big, so I entered the lyrics into the professional division in this song competition. About three months passed and I didn't hear anything, I finally gave up and just thought it was "wishful thinking." Then, unexpectedly, I received a letter from Nashville which stated, "You have scored two points under an honorable mention in the professional division. This is one of the strictest-scoring competitions and your lyrics have great potential." With this encouragement, I began to study more about writing lyrics with my neighbor, and we ended up putting together a couple of songs. Years later, I was ecstatic to win a special award from Billboard Magazine for my song *Country Heart*, which summed up all my feelings about the world.

Ron started to become jealous of my songwriting. He didn't like the fact that I was taking the time to pursue something that I really loved because he wasn't able to put time into his photography. Our interaction became very strained and Ron continued to shut down emotionally. I didn't want another divorce and was willing to do whatever it took to work things out, but if only one partner is willing to put in the effort, the relationship doesn't have a chance. Ron just gave up on everything. The beautiful stars of promise that he used to see in his life faded away.

Towards the end of our relationship, we received a strange message on our answering machine—it was my mother! I hadn't heard from my parents in over eight years. My mind started wandering as I ached inside for a real family. I never had a genuine sense of belonging to Ron's family because of the dissention between me, and his father and brother. I hoped that since so much time had passed that maybe my parents had changed favorably. After all, I had grown stronger through these years and was hoping that maybe they had matured as well. I needed their emotional support since I was very sad that my relationship with Ron was coming to an end, and I felt so alone. When I finally got the nerve to call my mother back, I thanked her for her message, but was heartbroken as she flatly denied ever having called me in the first place! How many of us wouldn't recognize our own mother's voice? My mother bold-faced lied to me! Regardless, since I craved a loving family, I decided to arrange a time to visit them. To my bitter disappointment, our getting together proved to be a very shallow reunion with barely a hug, and a lot of empty words. My hope of ever having a warm, caring relationship with my parents was just not going to happen.

Meeting Mr. America

Going back towards the end of my relationship with Ron, I realized that there was absolutely no hope for us after I received negative feedback from a psychologist regarding a possible resolution of our relationship. As a last resort, I also met with Ron's counselor to discuss our situation and everything I tried was futile. Then, one of Ron's hockey friends confided that they were frequenting topless bars and strip clubs. By that time, Ron had also put on some weight. This was completely opposite to the Ron I thought I knew! Confronting him about this strange behavior, I asked if I could go with him to see where he was going, and he replied, "These places are not appropriate place for a girl like you." I inquired as to why he was frequenting these bars, but he never answered me. It became obvious that I was hitting a dead-end and there was nothing that I could do about it. With much sadness, I decided to move out of our apartment because I couldn't tolerate these depressing circumstances any longer, and quickly located a room to rent in a nearby townhouse. My next task was to find a job so that I could support myself financially. I went to my friend, who was the manager of a chiropractic office, and asked for her advice. She told me that on the other side of this large building was a couple of chiropractors who were looking for an office manager. My friend not

only offered to give me a good recommendation, but also suggested that she could call them to schedule a job interview because she knew that I was very nervous; I was deeply touched that she wanted to help me. The job interview was set up for the following evening, and I met with one of the chiropractors, Dr. Lewen, who hired me shortly after. He mentioned that he wanted me to meet his partner, Dr. Greg Tefft, and arranged another meeting. When I saw Greg for the first time, I felt like my hormones were literally bumping into each other; I had never seen such a gorgeous hunk in my life! He looked like a Greek statue that had somehow come to life, and he was so full of life! I couldn't take my eyes off him, nor could any of the other women who came into his office. Previously, I'd gone for the tall, lanky type and most of the men I had seen with big muscles did not have handsome facial features; Greg was definitely the exception. He not only had an amazing physique, but an incredibly sculptured, perfectly featured face to match!

After a couple of months, Greg and I eventually started dating. I proceeded carefully with Greg because I wanted him to get to know me before I introduced him to my weird parents. I didn't want them to scare him off like they had done to others in the past. We arranged a time to meet with my parents on a weekend. During the drive up to Thousand Oaks, my palms were sweating because I anticipated the worst. As it turned out, my parents were very impressed with Greg, and oddly enough, my mother took the credit for bringing Greg and I together. Crazy? We never understood how she came up with this nutty fabrication since we had been together long before I introduced him to her. Mother liked the fact that Greg was a chiropractic doctor and came from a wealthy family. Now, thrilled that my parents finally approved of somebody I loved, I hoped that perhaps we could all be one happy family.

After Greg and I moved in together, I asked him if I could borrow some money to start my divorce proceedings, and he gladly handed it to me. Ron and I were physically separated, but nothing had been legally filed. I procured the paper work and as soon as I finished filling out the divorce documents, I sent them to the courthouse. The divorce settlement was simple because I gave Ron pretty much everything as I just took my clothes and the responsibility for most of our debts. Knowing that I was going into a better financial situation, I wanted to ensure that Ron was going to be able to get back on his feet. As it came close to the final date of dissolution, I called Ron to see if we could meet one last time, and he agreed. When Ron opened the door, we hugged each other and cried together for about an hour. I never told him that I had met someone else because I didn't want to hurt his feelings. I could tell that he was regretful that our relationship had gotten to this point, but I knew I had to move on and as I finally started to leave, we both hugged each other once again, wishing each other well. Ending our relationship was tough enough, but leaving Yetto behind really devastated me because she had been my unconditionally loving best friend for years. However, I had to respect the fact that she initially belonged to Ron. A year later, one of Ron's friends told me that Yetto died in Ron's arms from an apparent heart attack. His friend also mentioned that she waited by the door for a year expecting me to come home. It took a long time to forgive myself for leaving her behind, even though I knew I had no other choice.

In about another year's time, I received a strange call from a friend who used to work with Ron at the Minolta Corporation. She informed me that Ron had been critically injured in a motorcycle accident, and after having been in a coma for a long period of time, was now back on his feet. She proceeded to give me Ron's phone number and suggested that I call him. With Greg's okay, I hesitantly called Ron to see if there was anything I could do to help him. On the phone, his voice sounded muffled and he spoke very slowly. Ron had a hard time pronouncing some words, and I was heartbroken that he was in such bad shape. After speaking with him, I was perplexed because he barely remembered me. I immediately called his sister who explained that Ron had sustained some brain damage and suffered from severe amnesia so he did not remember a lot of things from his past, including me and our relationship; I was devastated. A couple of weeks later, I arranged to meet with Ron and his psychologist to see if I could help with any memory recall. I was very nervous to see

him because my memories were of the way he used to be, and to see him in this state was unbearable to me. After arriving, I was ushered into his psychologist's office. Ron had not arrived, and as I waited, I could hear the nervous pounding of my heart. When Ron finally walked in, my stomach sank. He had undergone plastic surgery and pretty much looked like the Ron I knew, but I could tell he wasn't the same. Moving in slow motion, he stuttered through his words, looking at me with blank eyes. It was obvious that he had no memory of me, saying, "I only know what others have told me about us and I was shown some pictures of our wedding." Ron called me a couple of pet names as he communicated that he remembered the "feeling of me," but not my image. My heart sank and I was completely shattered. I had spent many year of my life with Ron, and now it had been completely erased. My eyes started to tear up so I quickly looked away to regain my composure. Ron continued by asking, "Did I do anything to hurt you? I gently reassured him that our breakup was on good terms. He also wanted to know if he had been a good husband and why we broke up, so I replied, "You were the best husband. We just started to grow apart." He looked down and stopped asking questions. The Ron I used to know was now gone forever and a part of me felt like I had just died inside. We gave each other a quick hug goodbye and Ron promised to see me again, but that never happened. After I left, I realized that there was nothing else I could do to help him, and I walked down the hallway never to look back again. It took me a long time to come to terms with Ron's accident. I pondered that perhaps if I had stayed with him, then none of this would have happened. A week later, I called Ron's old hockey coach to touch base, and was completely baffled when he said, "Don't come near me or my family ever again. You are a troubled person. It is your fault this happened to Ron." I used to love Ron's ice hockey coach, his wife, and their two kids. Ron, Yetto and I spent many weekends at their Big Bear cabin in the mountains. These demoralizing statements not only shocked me, but haunted me for a long, long time.

Greg proposed on the day that my divorce was finalized, and we were married a few months later. To my disappointment, he didn't shop for a ring and present it to me in a romantic way. On a break from the office, I went to a few jewelry stores and finally found a pretty wedding ring set; all Greg did was to help select the diamond at a later date. His lack of interest in selecting the right wedding ring, or even surprising me with a beautiful engagement ring, was a sign that I just ignored because I was desperate for our relationship to work out. Greg's parents flew in from New York to meet with my parents, and Greg and I, for a pre-wedding dinner. I was very apprehensive about this occasion because I had no idea how my weird parents were going to react to my future in-laws. After we were all seated at the restaurant, just as I had anticipated, the conversation was very strained. To top this off, my parents completely embarrassed me when they not only didn't offer to help to pay for the dinner, but wouldn't even leave a tip because they felt Greg's parents were rich and could afford it more easily than they could. Their complete lack of etiquette and good manners made me sick, so I excused myself, went into the bathroom, and cried. My parents didn't offer any hospitality, so Greg's parents stayed in a nearby hotel. They wouldn't even contribute a nickel to our wedding. My mother sarcastically stated, "I can't keep track of who you are marrying this time." Later, I found out that my aunt and uncle, whom I'd never met, wanted to send Greg and me a wedding gift, and my mother told them, "Don't bother, it's not worth it."

I was working full-time at Greg's practice trying to keep up with all our personal needs while planning our wedding. Since my parents were acting so absurd, Greg's mother and father offered to pay for everything; all the wedding details were left up to me. Juggling a full-time job and wedding details were very tedious, but I managed to pull it all through. We were going to be married by the mother of actor/singer John Davidson, Reverend Elizabeth Davidson, an old time friend of Greg's family. Larry Wilcox (actor from the famous television series CHIPS) and his lovely wife Marlene, attended among other guests. Greg's best man, Brad, flew out from Connecticut with his wife, who was one of Greg's ex-girlfriends. On our wedding day, I looked exhausted because it was hard for me to keep up with everything that was going on. The makeup artist could barely cover the deep, dark

circles under my eyes. Just as the ceremony started, I became so nervous that you could see my flower bouquet shaking as I continued up the aisle. Once we got up to the podium, I relaxed as I looked deeply into Greg's eyes and Reverend Davidson started speaking. The wedding vows were beautiful and I cried as we put the rings on each other's fingers. With the final kiss at the end of the ceremony, all I could think was that I had a chance at a brand new start in my life. At the reception, my parents and sister sat at a separate table from everyone else, eating their vegetarian cuisine. They avoided talking to the other guests, making what should have been the best day of my life into another stressed situation. I was relieved when it was all over. All Greg and I could think about was getting away for two weeks on a wonderful honeymoon, and luckily, we had found a chiropractic friend of Greg's to watch the practice. Even though we were eager to leave, we took the time to thank our guests and then drove off in a white limousine. The next morning, we started our beautiful drive to Arizona. We spent our first few nights in a pretty, quaint little log cabin that was reserved especially for honeymoons, which was located in the middle of the woods in Flagstaff. The weather was crisp and cold with remnants of snow still on the ground. Unfortunately, I strained my ankle while walking down the cabin steps and had to be careful not to injure it any further. Nonetheless, I was excited to finally have the alone time that I craved so much with Greg – quality time that we could finally spend together without interference. Soon after we got there, I was totally shocked when Greg decided to leave me alone on our honeymoon in this cabin in the middle of nowhere, to go exploring by himself. I couldn't believe that he would do this to me! I was so aggravated because he left me alone with an injured ankle for hours! This was my honeymoon? Because there was no phone inside our cabin, I limped through the woods to find the phone booth I had seen near the entrance to the retreat, and I called my best friend, Sharon. When I heard her voice, I started to cry as I confided that I had just made the biggest mistake of my life, and was severely heartbroken. She reassured me that she would support me in whatever I decided to do; I was grateful that I had her to talk to. After I hung up, I hobbled back to the cabin and continued crying to myself. I should have decided to leave Greg at that time, but I didn't. I had no idea that this self-centeredness and total lack of protectiveness would haunt our relationship in the years to come. I felt that since I had been married a couple of times before, and my parents were already disgusted with me, I *had* to make this relationship work, no matter what. The rest of the honeymoon was strained because the chiropractor who was watching our practice kept calling us for one thing or another. We actually cut our honeymoon short by a couple of days because we were worried about the practice.

When we got back to Woodland Hills, we unpacked quickly and retired to bed. Greg left early the next morning to get to the office, and I joined him a little later. Mother called and in a horrible conversation with her, I could tell that she was trying to control everything once again. She had now become very jealous of Greg's wealthy parents and started throwing verbal darts not only at them, but at my relationship with Greg – the very guy that they had initially approved and welcomed with open arms. This was “the straw that broke the camel's back,” and I hung up abruptly without even saying goodbye. In the coming days, I decided to write three letters: one to my father, one to my sister, and a ten-page letter to my mother, the longest of the three. I couldn't stand hearing my mother, father, and sister to continue to lie and twist the truth. By communicating my honest feelings, I felt that we, as a family, could straighten everything out and move forward with our lives in a positive way, once and for all. I didn't really expect them to agree on every issue, but I just wanted them to respect my feelings and opinions, and hopefully improve our relationships in the process.

The result of this effort was dreadful. My father sent a letter back that didn't address any of the issues brought out in my letter to him. Then, I received a phone call from my sister who said, “You are a fucking bitch because you made our mother cry.” Mother never responded to her letter. After a few months, I received an absolutely appalling letter from them as they added up everything they paid for on my behalf since the day I was born. Coming up with a horrendous amount of one hundred fifty thousand dollars, they insisted that I pay this sum back as quickly as possible. I was speechless

and completely stunned that they would stoop to such a low level. Going through the entire letter was too debilitating to my heart and soul, so I asked Greg if he could read the rest of it and then burn it. After that, I completely stopped all communication with them. Historically, always true to form, it was their way or the highway, so I chose the latter. I came to the conclusion that my parents will never change, and since I couldn't expect any changes from them, I had to work on changing myself.

In retrospect, I realize that when I married Carl, who was extremely controlling and obsessively possessive, I had married my mother. When I married Ron, a passive-aggressive person who sometimes had a hard time expressing himself, I had married my father. I had yet to find out what the marriage to Greg was all about. A short while after Greg and I were married, we had an astrological reading with some very gloomy predictions. The astrologer told us that over the next seven to eight years, there would be a lot of obstacles to overcome, and he saw a great deal of financial hardship. He also said, "If your marriage lasts more than a few months, it will be a miracle." Greg and I were in total disbelief and didn't know how much credence to give an astrological reading, so we took it with a grain of salt. However, over the years to follow, most of these dreadful predictions not only came true, but there was so much more, and my years with Greg made everything else look like a walk in the park.

2

Inside Mr. America

To understand Greg even further, I asked him many questions about what lead him to the incredibly competitive sport of bodybuilding, and how he became Mr. America. Greg was my first introduction to the bodybuilding community which, as I discovered, is a well-defined subculture.

There is an unspoken admiration and natural sense of competition men seem to have for those with the largest muscles, particularly the taller ones. This reminds me of "survival of the fittest" in the animal kingdom where the weaker die quickly or are killed off, and only the strongest survive. In our more civilized world, some women tend to gravitate towards strong, large men because of their natural instincts to feel safe and protected. And, there's something to be said about the hormonal rush we feel when we are around such an individual!

At one time or another, each of us has probably wondered what it would be like to be Mr. America. I learned so much from Greg about the tremendous dedication and fortitude that it takes to pursue this gut-wrenching goal. The daily routine, which begins a year before a competition, is a painstaking program of appropriate exercise, diet with attention to perfect food combinations, stress management, nutrient supplementation, adequate rest, etc. Bodybuilders follow precisely planned diet and exercise routines to optimize their muscularity. A week before the show, in order to achieve the ultimate polished look for the day of competition, bodybuilders doggedly exert great discipline in dietary management which could easily break the average person's spirit. During the first four days of this week, competitors reduce their carbohydrates to as little as a piece of bread, a potato, or some rice, plus an apple a day, as they dramatically increasing their protein intake. They simultaneously use an extravagant amount of salt on their food while drinking as much water as possible. At this

time, competitors continue to exercise at a faster pace, with lighter weight and more repetitions for maximum muscle pumping. During the final three days of the pre-competition week, water consumption is progressively reduced to less than a glass a day. Salt intake is halted and replaced with potassium crystals. At the same time, protein consumption is decreased and carbohydrates are drastically increased. Competitors eat as much starch as possible—pasta, potatoes, rice, etc. During this short polishing period, the drastic increase in dietary carbohydrates tend to make one extremely thirsty, but, for best results, drinking water is out of the question. Competitors end up sucking on an ice cube now and then just to feel alive. Also, during these last three days, competitors don't exercise. They practice their posing routines accompanied by light abdominal work and stretching movements. The purpose of this drastic pre-contest procedure during this final week, called a "glycogen load dehydration salt rebound," is to maximize the muscles' size and pump ability (the muscle's ability to engorge with blood). It is also used to tighten and thin the skin as much as possible to clearly show muscular definition. The one word that would describe this highly controlled lifestyle is discipline. This type of rigid discipline is torturous and most of us could not tolerate or even come close to this kind of restricted living.

When I met Greg, he was the only man in history to be a triple-crown, three-time Natural Mr. America. Like the Olympics, the Natural Mr. America competition tests contestants for drug use, whereas the Mr. America contest does not. The most common drugs used by weightlifters are steroids, which, as explained to me, are specific drug compounds used to help increase muscle mass, strength, endurance, and reduce physical recuperation time. Growth hormone is another size-promoting drug that is not classified as a steroid. All these drugs are widely used in the bodybuilding community as well as by other non-bodybuilding athletes. The use of these drugs are generally frowned upon, and in most cases, expressly forbidden by athletic governing bodies including the International Olympic Committee. In time, with Greg's help, I was able to see the difference between the steroid-dependent, almost freaky-looking bodybuilder, and the more symmetrical, natural bodybuilder. The steroid guys (and gals) walk stiffly and have monstrous muscles that look bloated, with very pronounced veins and skin coarseness. The natural bodybuilder moves more gracefully with a smoother, more natural and less freaky-looking muscular appearance. They are well-defined, but their muscles are well-proportioned to the rest of their body.

I found it difficult to comprehend why one would take these dangerous, health-compromising drugs just to win a body-beautiful competition. And, even without the drugs, why would someone want to put themselves through such intense, painstaking, and uncomfortable efforts to become Mr. America?

On a Dare

In my very first conversation with Greg, I asked him, "What made you decide to become Mr. America?" His response was very simple and straight to the point. Looking directly into my eyes, he said, "I did it on a dare." I was shocked! How many of us really take our dares seriously? Greg explained that this dare came from a guy named John, an ex-college football player, who was in one of his graduate Exercise Physiology classes. John was a self-proclaimed "resident bodybuilding expert," even though he hadn't won any competitions. He criticized Greg for being too intellectual about bodybuilding stating, "You are all talk and no action." John questioned whether Greg could put what he knew intellectually into serious bodybuilding practice and Greg thought the same about John, considering him to be hypocritical. They were both competing for top honors in an Exercise Physiology class and had an ongoing rivalry for the role of teacher's pet. Greg just couldn't stand the fact that this big man on campus, a total egomaniac, considered himself to be the best at everything. John was extremely upset when Greg always got better grades than him. Out of ego or jealousy, John dared Greg to compete against him in a real bodybuilding competition. When they first met,

Greg was powerlifting and had already won two out of three low-level competitions. However, powerlifting is strictly for strength development, whereas bodybuilding focuses on maximizing the physical structure. Almost like apples and oranges, they are very different in terms of preparation and objectives. I guess John felt that Greg's past achievements in powerlifting were non-threatening to him in bodybuilding terms.

John's challenge was for Greg to compete in an upcoming bodybuilding show, Mr. Niagara Falls. As fate would have it, John broke his arm six weeks before this scheduled show, postponing the bet until the next competition, Mr. Senior Tri Cities; this meet was to be held six months later. Despite this setback, Greg went forward with the Mr. Niagara Falls show and came in second. This inspired him to ardently continue his training. When the competition with John finally arrived, much to John's bitter disappointment, Greg won second place with John getting sixth in the show. John became very humble after this meet; they never saw each other again after graduation. To the best of Greg's knowledge, John never competed again. However, John's dare helped opened Greg's eyes to the fact that he really enjoyed the sport of bodybuilding, and he subsequently decided to pursue it further.

Jock with Brains

I admired a person who could achieve what Greg accomplished by the young age of twenty-eight. Greg had kept a high grade point average through high school and college, and almost completed an accelerated Ph.D. program in Exercise Physiology, with certification in Adaptive Physical Education. When he was in high school, because of his straight As in biology, and his high SAT scores in Science, he was awarded a special internship for high school students with the American Cancer Society Research Foundation headed by the famous researcher, Dr. Oscar Auerbach. At that time, this Foundation was preparing to present research to Congress that would eventually result in placing warning labels on cigarette packages. Greg later went on to get his Doctor of Chiropractic degree, also becoming Board Certified as a Naturopathic Physician by the American Naturopathic Medical Association. In addition to these phenomenal accomplishments, I also found out that Greg had placed in the Mr. Buffalo competition, and then went on to win the Tournament of Champions show which qualified him for the national competition scene.

Greg also excelled in swimming as well as track and field. From the age of seven through his last year in high school, Greg was a top-ranked swimmer who achieved countless victories. During his high school years, he practiced two to three hours a day, with split sessions that sometimes added up to five hours a day. Six weeks before a major swimming competition, he would get into an accelerated training program with greater intensity and less rest. Greg's swimming career was cut short after a series of events beginning with the violent deaths of two of his close friends that were in a severe car accident. Being the first person at the scene of this night time accident, Greg pulled out the mutilated bodies from the upside down car with a help of a friend, who drove up a couple of minutes later. After the initial shock of this horrible event, deep depression overtook him. Due to a sudden onset of asthma, he was not able to make the Olympic cutoffs in swimming. A few years later, after recovering from the asthmatic effects and shock of the accident, Greg pursued track and field. He specialized in the hammer throw where he got his first taste of weightlifting while training for this sport. In a Junior Olympic competition, he came in fifth with the hammer throw. Because he was competing against guys who were much heavier than him, he realized that he would have a better future in athletics if he increased his strength. As a swimmer, he had a lot of endurance and speed, but with powerlifting and then bodybuilding, the feeling of doubling and tripling his strength was exhilarating.

As a power lifter, he was fascinated by the amount of muscle mass and strength he gained by simply eating more and lifting progressively heavier weight. When he started powerlifting at the age of nineteen, he weighed one hundred sixty-five pounds. Through eight weeks of intense eating, six to

eight meals a day of high protein and lots of carbohydrates, and a rigorous program of exercise (two and a half to three hours a day, six days a week), he bulked up to one hundred eighty-five pounds. Greg continued to slowly build up to two hundred five pounds on a similar regimen with a little less food and more specific power lift training. Through a period of five and half years, he competed in three competitions: two at the weight of two hundred twenty pounds, and one at the weight of two hundred forty pounds. He won one competition at two hundred twenty pounds and another at two hundred forty pounds. After returning to bodybuilding and competing in a series of bodybuilding competitions, he bulked up to two hundred seventy-five pounds to prepare for the World's Strongest Man Competition. The World's Strongest Twins, known as the Barbarian Brothers, claimed to be the strongest twin bodybuilders in the world. Greg wanted to prove that they were not as strong as they claimed to be compared to other bodybuilders, by challenging them in a potential publicity stunt. To add insult to injury, Greg could prove that he was not on steroids or growth hormone, whereas the Barbarians could not. Bill Reynolds, the former editor-in-chief of Joe Weider's *Muscle and Fitness Magazines* as well as *Flex Magazine*, picked up on this publicity stunt and was going to call it "Natural Mr. America Challenges the Barbarians." Bill was also the one who dubbed Greg the "Mind-Body Connector" in a 1986 issue of *Flex*.

Unfortunately, Greg hurt his wrist curling one hundred forty pound dumbbells in each hand and strained his hip when squatting seven hundred fifty pounds. With these injuries, he was not able to compete in the World's Strongest Man Competition. There was a rumor that the Barbarians spied on Greg and found out the Greg was using more weight in the seated, behind-the-neck seated barbell press than they could lift. Subsequently, the Barbarians told Bill Reynolds that they were not interested in the challenge which actually pleased Greg, as he was now able to rest from his injuries.

Weightlifters have always fascinated Greg as he followed the careers of Vassely Alexiev, Larry Pacifico, Dave Draper, and Arnold Schwarzenegger. As a bodybuilder, Greg liked the idea of being able to shape his own body while dropping body fat to desired levels. Ultimately, he found satisfaction in combining the principles of powerlifting and bodybuilding for both structure and function to maximize the muscular look as well as the strength and power of his physique. This newfound satisfaction was quite a vivid contrast to his earlier years as an athlete.

Becoming Mr. America

Going back to John's original bodybuilding dare as mentioned previously, Greg started competing in a number of competitions to perfect his physique and qualify for national levels of competition. At this time, he had no idea what steroids were really about. But, as time progressed, he began to realize that he was competing against bodybuilders who were secretly taking these drugs. He didn't want to go on steroids, and was very pleased when he found out about the natural bodybuilding movement, especially the Natural Mr. America competition. In these natural meets, contestants had to pass drug tests in order to compete. To Greg, this evened the competitive playing field by eliminating competitors who were seeking artificial results through drug enhancements instead of regular training. It always bothered him that most steroid users took drugs for fast-track results and didn't have as much knowledge about how to achieve the best physique through proper training and nutrition, as they should. He stated, "Bodybuilders taking steroids are much more prone to unhealthful risk factors because they are able to push themselves to greater extremes of diet and training. The steroids provide a false sense of security and besides being illegal, have many dangerous side-effects." He continued by saying, "It's best to work with your own genetics, motivation, and commitment to fully know yourself, and better understand your strengths and weaknesses as well as your limitations." For him, bodybuilding was all about this self-discovery process and not about cheating your way to competitive success with drugs. However, the guys around him were gaining muscle very quickly because they were taking these drugs and lying about it. At the time, Greg

believed that these gym guys were clean of steroids, so he responded by working out even harder, eating more precisely in order to keep up with them.

In Greg's first Natural Mr. America show, there were more than one hundred sixty guys with great physiques. He was completely surprised when he won this show -- he never expected to win. It gave him tremendous confidence, so he decided to try another national show. To his utter amazement, he won the next two Natural Mr. America competitions. But, Greg was heartbroken when he learned that after his third Natural Mr. America show in Pittsburgh, the competition was going to be dropped by the sponsors because it was too expensive to continue testing all the competitors effectively, and still make a reasonable profit. If he wanted to continue competing at the national level, which he was qualified to do, he would now have to compete in the regular untested Mr. America shows, where drug screening was not required. So, when he competed in his first regular Mr. America show without drugs, he came in eighth place in his height class. Even though this was an amazing achievement, given Greg's unyielding competitive spirit, this was totally unsatisfactory. He was used to winning and couldn't stand the thought of having placed eighth. After much thought, he hesitantly decided to use a low dose of steroids as prescribed by a doctor. He thought a little bit of these drugs could put him over the top and back into first place, but it didn't work out that way. In his next Mr. America competition, he placed seventh, and was very frustrated that his strategy to take a mild round of steroids didn't work. One of the judges, who happened to be a medical doctor, told Greg that the amount of steroids he was taking for this competition was a joke, and that he would have to take a lot more to win. This doctor suggested that he take stronger and higher doses of steroids for the next show, which would make it a guaranteed win. Seeing Greg's hesitation, the doctor reminded him that all of his gym buddies, including those from the infamous Uptown Whittier Fitness Center, were routinely using these designer drugs. Later on, this gym got busted for underground steroid dealing which turned out to be one of the largest steroid busts in U.S. history. Greg ended up taking a little less than half of what this doctor recommended because he was still trying to be cautious and conservative. He was never comfortable with the whole idea of taking steroids, and as he became bigger and stronger than he ever thought imaginable, Greg still came in only sixth place in the next competition.

However, during this last Mr. America competition in 1986, Greg was approached by a politically powerful photographer who claimed to be influential over the judging panel because he was an investor in the show. This photographer controlled much of the show's media and had written favorably about Greg in numerous bodybuilding magazines. He stated, "Greg, you will make bodybuilding history by winning this show because no one has ever won both the Natural Mr. America and Mr. America competitions." The real shocker came when the photographer asked Greg to pay him five thousand five hundred dollars and, along with sexual favors, he would guarantee that Greg would win first place in this competition; Greg couldn't believe his ears. After all these years of hard work, not to mention taking dangerous steroids, was the culmination of his dream boiling down to slimy politics? The photographer knew that Greg had money due to his thriving chiropractic practice. He'd apparently had a crush on Greg for a long time and Greg soon realized this was the reason the photographer had written so many upbeat articles about him through the years. Greg diplomatically declined the offer because he felt the guy was lying about his political influence, he didn't like the "dirty politics" and wanted to win fairly, and Greg is straight. The photographer responded, "Okay, you need to learn a lesson. Let me pick a place for you." After a pause, he said, "Okay, sixth." He told Greg he would reserve first place for someone who would agree to his terms, and pay even more money to win. The photographer went on by saying, "On the books, the judges actually have you at first or second place, but that will change with my intervention." To Greg's horror, this all came true when he came in sixth place. The guy who actually took first place was booed off the stage by an angry, explosive Dallas audience who knew the show was obviously fixed. People loudly booed and pounded their feet for quite some time, nearly inciting a riot.

After this insane, unjust incident, Greg felt it was time to change athletic associations. Originally there was only one bodybuilding association and now there were two. The original AAU (Amateur Athletic Union) formed a second association called the NPC (National Physique Committee). The NPC felt that Greg had been judged unfairly in the Mr. America competitions run by the AAU and wanted him to compete exclusively in their NPC shows. They were going to publicize him as “Natural Mr. America Goes to the Nationals.” Greg had already placed second in one of their highest level shows, the Tournament of Champions. The publishers of the two largest and most popular muscle magazines, who backed the most famous bodybuilders such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, continued to push Greg about how important it was for him to take steroids because they felt he would be a sure bet for the Mr. Olympia competition. (Arnold Schwarzenegger won the Mr. Olympia competition seven times.) They wanted a blond-haired, blue-eyed man with a German background to replace the original blond bomber, Dave Draper, who was the biggest bodybuilding star before Arnold made the scene. To take this a step further, certain higher-ups in the NPC camp and its publicity machine wanted Greg not only to take these drugs, but to lie about it by saying that he was “all natural.” They needed him to endorse their products by explaining that it was not steroids, but their products and training advice that had made him this “big and bad.”

On the morning of the 1987 Nationals, contestants were prejudged in the first part of the show and the top ten places were picked for the night show pose-off. Greg’s heavyweight class contained so many competitors, that the judges could not utilize the traditional semi-circle judging pattern, where all the contestants were on the stage all at once in plain view of the judges. Instead, line judging was used with eight lines, seven contestants in a line. Each line walked onto the stage, posed, and got off. Greg felt that since the judges couldn’t see everyone all at once, the contestants could not be judged fairly. Even more problematic was when Greg’s line was on the stage, the head judge, along with three other judges, continued their conversation and never looked up at his line—not even once! From an inside source, Greg learned that the judges had not been made aware of his presence. Most of the higher-ranking officials from the West Coast, who would have brought attention to Greg, were not even there. The judging panel was predominantly from the East Coast, which apparently affected the outcome of the show since the western bodybuilders did not place as well as expected. Greg found out from one of the judges in the other weight classes, that the three “golden boys” from California, Greg being one of them, who were favored to win or place high in their classes, were all given low placing. One “blond bomber” who had come in second in his class the year before, took eleventh place behind Greg. Knowing of Greg’s tenth place finish, the photographer accompanying Greg made a call to the publisher of a West Coast magazine who told the photographer that Greg must leave the show and not accept the degrading tenth placing. Instead, they wanted him to compete again the following year under better circumstances. In their minds, it just didn’t look good for Natural Mr. America to take less than a fifth place. The photographer expressed that media groups behind the NPC association would give Greg a lot of hype to make it more politically efficient for him to win the next year.

Back to politics once again, from gay propositions and judging buyouts to strategized marketing for a guaranteed win! Greg finally decided he had enough. He left the competitive bodybuilding arena once and for all. It was becoming more difficult to compete against bodybuilders who took enormous doses of steroids and growth hormone. More and more bodybuilders were chemically inducing muscular gains with new generations of designer drugs. The natural movement had fallen from the scene due to the high costs of drug testing, and people were enjoying the freak shows performed by modern day muscular steroid monsters. Greg became disenchanted with the direction his favorite sport of bodybuilding was taking. He was unwilling to continue to risk his health and well-being by taking these dangerous drugs that were required to compete. Bodybuilding had become nothing more than a game of how many steroids you could take and how many butts you could kiss to make headway.

It was quite an eye-opening experience hearing Greg's story about the tremendous trials and tribulations of his competitive bodybuilding days. I felt repulsed by the manipulation and dishonesty used for the sole purpose of control and media hype. When I met Greg, it was right after his final competition. I had no understanding of steroids or their long-term side-effects, nor did I understand the narcissism that would drive someone to want to be in the profession of bodybuilding. All I could see was Greg Tefft—the man who not only had exceptional academic achievements, but had the stamina and discipline to prepare for such rigorous competitions. He won bodybuilding shows against all odds, excelled in so many sports, and didn't sell himself short to the highest bidder. I loved the fact that he was an amazing chiropractor and naturopath who not only cared about his patients, but went out of his way to help them. This was the man I fell in love with -- that's why I Married Mr. America.