

Famous

Father

Girl

A MEMOIR OF
GROWING UP BERNSTEIN



Jamie Bernstein



HARPER

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To my beloved, delicious family: in every generation.

“I feel like it didn’t really happen until I tell someone the story.”

—DICK AVEDON

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I

The Osborne



LB, Jamie, and Henry the dachshund, 1953.

The story goes that when my brother was born, Henry the dachshund and I were both so outraged by the intrusion that we jointly peed on my mother's pillow. Nor was I consoled a year later, as I warily watched Alexander pull himself to his feet; was this little interloper going to walk now, too?

But as soon as Alexander could talk, I realized what the point of a brother was. We became coconspirators, eventually expanding into a trio with our younger sister, Nina. Together we created a force field around ourselves, a layer of insulation from the raucous,

confusing world of our parents. But there was something seductive about that world, too, with its laughter and teasing; its music, theater, and books; the screaming parlor games; the elegance of smoking.

We lived in a duplex in the Osborne, a nineteenth-century apartment building on West 57th Street that had, by the 1950s, acquired a patina of sooty grandeur. Alexander and I spent little time in the downstairs spaces: the living room, with its wall of smoked mirrors and pair of nested brown pianos; the connecting library, with its clunky television console; or the studio off the front hall, where Daddy worked. We never ate dinner with the grownups in the formal dining room. Our domain was in the kitchen, where we had all our meals, and in our bedroom upstairs, with our toys and games, and our record player with the fuzzy animal decals on the sides.

In the evenings, after Rosalia, the cook, gave us dinner and our nanny, Julia, bathed us upstairs, my brother and I were brought in our bathrobes to the library, where our parents would be having before-dinner drinks with their friends. All the grownups would make a lovely fuss over us. Daddy would let Alexander open and close his Zippo lighter: *shhhuppp, shhhuppp*; Mummy would peel the thin red cellophane ribbon off her fresh pack of Chesterfields, expertly zip the ribbon between her thumb and fingernail, and crimp it into a little corkscrew to tuck behind my ear. Alexander would perform silly dances, while I stood on the arm of the sofa giving loud, arm-waving speeches in gibberish—imitating the man with the brushy little moustache and plastered-down hair whose occasional appearances on the library TV always wiped the smiles off the grownups' faces. They would explain to me in oddly tense tones that he was "a very bad man." But they enjoyed my impersonation, cheering lustily after each of my fiery cadences.

Too soon, Julia's starched white uniform would materialize in the doorway, signaling it was time for us to go to bed. "Kisses all around, good night, good night!" our mother would trill. But we never wanted to leave. Finally, Mummy would warn us that if we didn't cooperate, we'd have to be taken "*a la fuerza*," by force. I thought the phrase meant that I'd be sent to a hellish place of punishment: "I don't want to go to the fuerza!" I would scream, kicking Julia's shins as she dragged me upstairs. (The next day, she'd point accusingly at her bruises: "Look what you did to me!")

In the glow of the nightlight, Alexander and I lay in our beds, listening to the grownups carrying on downstairs. We sailed into slumber on the waves of their revelry: the tinkling of ice plopping into glasses, the roaring of songs around the piano. We knew it had to be our father at the piano, with the others clustered around him.



"Don't drop him!" The family in the Osborne.

It seemed as if all grownups ever did was have fun, with Daddy as their audible ringleader.

Our mother, Felicia, would be right beside him at the piano. Petite and elegantly beautiful, with a long, swan-like neck, she had grown up in Chile, the middle daughter of Chita, an aristocratic Costa Rican, and Roy Cohn, an American mining engineer. (No relation to the nefarious Roy Cohn of the McCarthy hearings.)

Felicia Cohn was a wild spirit; Chile was too small and provincial to contain her. In her twenties, she was allowed to move to New York to study piano with her fellow Chilean, the eminent pianist Claudio Arrau. But upon arrival, Felicia shifted to an acting career, which likely had been her plan all along. She lived in a basement apartment in Greenwich Village with her dog, Nebbish. It was 1946, Felicia was twenty-four—and that's when she met Leonard Bernstein.

We often heard the story: There was a joint birthday celebration for Felicia and Claudio Arrau. Lenny Bernstein, the brash, handsome young musician everyone was talking about, showed up at the party. Bernstein had been in the news ever since his nationally broadcast conducting debut with the New York Philharmonic three years earlier: at age twenty-five, he'd stepped in for the flu-stricken maestro, Bruno Walter, in Carnegie Hall—an event that made the front page of the *New York Times*. Soon after, Bernstein made a double splash as a composer: first with his ballet *Fancy Free*, about three sailors on the loose in New York City, and then with *On the Town*, the hit Broadway show inspired by the ballet. Leonard Bernstein was young, American-born, Jewish, Harvard-educated, matinee-idol handsome, madly charismatic: a superstar. The press lavished its attentions on him, as did the women, and men, in every room he entered. This was the man Felicia met that night in 1946. As the story came down to us,

Lenny sat on the couch while Felicia curled up at his feet and fed him shrimp, one by one.

They became engaged; there was even a notice about it in a gossip column. But then they broke it off. There were complications; they just couldn't make the leap. Felicia went off to be Eva Gabor's understudy in a Broadway play, where she fell in love with the leading man, Richard Hart. He was a hopeless alcoholic, abusive when drunk, but she loved him. She told us that Hart died in her arms, of liver failure. A couple of years later, sadder but wiser, or something, Felicia and Lenny decided to make a go of it after all. They married in September of 1951, flooded with nerves. On the drive from Massachusetts to Mexico for their honeymoon, Lenny—possibly out of pure suppressed panic—drilled Felicia on the rules of English grammar. Each morning, they would climb back into the car and Daddy would say, "You remember in yesterday's lesson . . ." It's a miracle the marriage even made it to Mexico.

They spent their honeymoon in a cheerful villa in Cuernavaca, spending much of their time with the writer Martha Gellhorn, who would become a lifelong friend. She may well have saved the shaky new marriage by toggling back and forth between the anxious newlyweds, lending each a sympathetic ear. I was born exactly one year later.

When I was little, my mother was a steadily working stage actress, using her mother's maiden surname: Felicia Montealegre. She also acted in live television dramas, winning awards for her performances on shows like *Playhouse 90* and *Kraft Theatre*. And she did concert narrations, as well. In our living room, there was a framed photograph of Mummy as Joan of Arc, her eyes looking heavenward as she is consumed by a backdrop of flames. Alexander and I loved that picture. We had no idea she was narrating

Honegger's oratorio; as far as we were concerned, our mother simply *was* Joan of Arc.

But there was so much more to Felicia. She was witty and well-read; she could fix lamps, paint windowsills, perform flawless manicures. She was even an expert hair cutter. We thought she looked so professional, snipping away at our father's head, occasionally leaning back to assess her handiwork, the comb gripped between her teeth.

One area where Felicia's expertise did not extend was in the kitchen. She could make one dish—baked eggs with béchamel sauce—but was otherwise happy to turn the proceedings over to Rosalia, her fellow Chilean. My mother had solved a uniquely personal puzzle when she decided that “the kitchen of life,” as she



Felicia in the role of Joan of Arc.

called household matters, would be conducted entirely in her native Spanish. My father spoke several languages and could fake his way through Spanish, but he was far from fluent. The South American staff gave my mother a comforting balance in that Bernstein-heavy universe. As for us three kids, we received the priceless, wholly unearned gift of growing up bilingual.

(The only drawback was my constant childhood language mix-ups. Not only was I sorting out two languages at once; I was also coping with my father's vaguely Boston Brahmin accent, as well as the perfumed diction of my mother's stage voice. So I grew up thinking we traveled to Cape Card in the summers, and that everyone prayed to Guard—which, after all, made a kind of sense.)

Julia Vega (pronounced the Spanish way: "Hoo-lia") was our Chilean nanny. Organized, dependable, and willing to enforce the rules, Julia was utterly devoted to our mother and soon became the housekeeper, in charge of the whole domestic scene. Her English was strong enough to order the groceries over the phone, and accompany Alexander and me to Bloomingdale's to buy shoes. Julia's room contained the only other television in the house. When Alexander or I got sick, we were allowed to spend the whole day in Julia's bed, drinking warm ginger ale in a fervid daze while watching the weekly feature on *Million Dollar Movie* over and over again.

But Julia was also irascible, and she shamelessly favored her "*niñito*," my baby brother. Rosalia, the cook, by contrast, was sunny and relaxed, and her affections helped offset Julia's wounding favoritism. The best day of the week was Friday, Julia's day off, when Rosalia was put in charge of us. She was far less interested in rules, even going so far as to indulge us in the ultimate transgression: dinner in front of Julia's television.

Supplemented with an ever-shifting series of South American

maids, this staff of two was the engine of the safe and nurturing household Alexander and I inhabited in our early years. The staff referred to our mother as *La Señora*, and to our father as *El Caballero*: the Cavalier, literally—a rather archaic honorific. But it became somewhat more fitting in 1958, when he became the principal conductor of the New York Philharmonic, right across the street at Carnegie Hall.

As kids, we had no idea that our father's background among striving Jewish immigrants in the Boston suburbs might be incongruous with being called a *caballero*. Nor did it seem odd for this Daddy of ours, who played on the floor with us and loved jokes about bodily functions, to wear tails and a long black cape to work, to tour the world for weeks at a time, and occasionally even to materialize on the screen of that clunky black-and-white television in the library. *El Caballero* worked hard, and was always hungry. Rosalia would prepare him special lavish breakfasts every day, featuring eggs with bacon or sausage—or sometimes, to our disgust, kippers. The combined morning smells on Daddy's breath of orange juice, coffee, L&M cigarettes, and kippered herring made for a revoltingly heady mix.

Another characteristic Daddy smell was the blend of cigarette smoke and flatulence, which would commence at the breakfast table, once the nicotine and coffee had achieved their combined effect. "I'm getting stinky," he would announce, and soon he was off to the bathroom with an as-yet-unread section of the newspaper, or perhaps one of his beloved, bedevilingly hard British crossword puzzles. Sometimes he would bring along symphonic scores to study. *El Caballero* would sit contentedly on his porcelain throne for long periods: smoking, reading, puzzling, studying, stinking. He almost always left the door open, and was not averse to being interrupted.

One morning I had to show Daddy something important and



Jamie and Alexander hugging Julia.

ran into his studio, where I found him sitting in his bathroom there, smoking away with a score on his lap. I begged him to look at whatever it was I was so excited about, and he replied, “Oh, I’ll be with you in a minute, darling—let me just finish this movement.” Then he exploded in laughter, which culminated in the usual coughing fit, and after pulling himself together, he explained to me why what he’d said was so funny. There simply was no moment when Leonard Bernstein wasn’t being a teacher.

It was words, above all, that he shared with us in all their glorious incarnations. He was reciting Lewis Carroll, and telling me

the difference between nouns and verbs, before I could write my name. The summer when I was six, as we gazed out on a placid lagoon, Daddy explained that if we said it looked *like* a mirror, we were using a figure of speech known as a simile. But if we said the lagoon *was* a mirror, then the figure of speech was a metaphor. For the rest of that summer, on every windless day, we'd all tell one another, "The lagoon is a figure of speech today."

He treasured jokes. Jewish jokes, vaudeville routines, old-time radio gags—Daddy knew them all, and told them with unalloyed gusto. By age seven, I already knew the running vaudeville gag where a rumpled old salesman crosses the stage after every act, holding a bunch of multicolored balloons and intoning, "Rubber balloons . . . rubber balloons . . ." Later in the show, Daddy explained, a chorus girl faints and crumples to the floor, creating a ruckus as the other performers rush to her side, shouting out suggestions: "Rub her ankles!" "Rub her forehead!" "Rub her wrists!" Along comes the rumpled salesman: "Rub 'er balloons . . ."

In my mind's eye, my father is always in a scruffy brown wool bathrobe; my cheek still prickles at the memory of his scratchy morning hugs. He was frequently away on conducting tours; we never felt we got enough of him. When he'd suddenly rematerialize at the front door, putting down his soft leather suitcase and squatting down to enfold us in his arms, Alexander and I would tumble all over him like puppies—"Daddy Daddy Daddy Daddy"—mad with joy, and hungry for the presents he'd brought us from those faraway lands. Mummy stood to the side, grinning, waiting her turn for the deep, tender kiss her husband would give her.

One Christmas morning, Alexander and I were watching television in Julia's bedroom, waiting interminably, it seemed, for our parents to wake so we could open our presents. At last, Daddy appeared at the door, all tousled and sleepy. "Merry Christmas," he

croaked in his precoffee voice, with an especially bright smile—whereupon there was a stirring under the brown wool, and up from the bathrobe wriggled . . . a dachshund puppy: our brand-new Henry, squirming upward to lick Daddy's chin.

But this new Henry was a very bad dog. He simply would not be housebroken—and he seemed especially to enjoy peeing in Alexander's and my room. Daddy sat on the edge of my bed, despairing. "But *why*?" he said to us. "*Why* does Henry keep peeing in here?" I thought about it. "Maybe," I ventured, "maybe it's because it's so sunny in this room that he thinks he's outside, and so he thinks he's peeing outside, like he's supposed to."

Then four-year-old Alexander said, "Maybe he *likes* to be bad."

Daddy straightened up with new interest. "Hmm . . . he *likes* to be bad! Maybe you're onto something there." I was stung that my scientific theory had been ignored in place of my baby brother's ridiculous suggestion.

There were always people, so many people, drifting in and out of our house. The most frequent visitors were Daddy's two siblings: his sister Shirley and brother Burton. Shirley, who was also my godmother, was a vivacious, excitable, attractive woman, with a big ringing laugh. She would take me on special dates to Rumpelmayer's for cake and ice cream—grateful, I suspect, to have me along as an excuse to indulge in those treats.

As a baby, I called my father's brother Uncle BB, and it stuck. He was thirteen years younger than our father, and barely in his twenties when I was little. BB was pure fun. He could run straight up the trunk of a tree to rescue our snarled kite. He introduced us to the joys of practical jokes: dribble glasses, whoopee cushions, plastic ice cubes with a housefly trapped inside. His best audience was his own brother and sister, who roared over his hijinks.

After our own parents and the Spanish-speaking staff, those

three Bernstein siblings were the most stable human structure in our universe. They were devoted to one another; during the Second World War they'd even referred to themselves as the Impenetrable Bernstein Front. As a trio they could be exhausting, but our mother was exceptionally patient with their endless in-jokes and teasing. She even learned their private language, Rybernian; she was one of the very few non-Bernsteins who did.

Daddy had created the language with his childhood neighbor Eddie Ryack (hence its portmanteau name). It wasn't a comprehensive language, but rather the saying of certain words or phrases in funny ways, based on a mash-up of pronunciations and sonorities produced by the boys' older immigrant relatives. My father's Rybernian name was Lennuhtt. "Do it" or "did it" was "didduhtt." Shirley was Hilee (rhymes with "smiley"). "I love



Lenny, Shirley, and BB on Martha's Vineyard.

you” was “Me laudü.” And BB was Baudümü. It was entirely rude and peculiar, and *loud*; shouting was one of the attributes of that older generation that Rybernian was mimicking.

Shirley and BB were the most constant presences, but our house was continually full of our parents’ friends. Only much later did I realize how extraordinary it was to be surrounded on a regular basis by (let the name-dropping begin) Dick Avedon, Mike Nichols, Betty Comden and Adolph Green, Lillian Hellman, Steve Sondheim, Jerry Robbins, Sidney Lumet, Betty (Lauren) Bacall, Isaac Stern . . . Their luminosity meant nothing to Alexander and me.

It made sense that so many of these friends were also our father’s work colleagues; the membrane between work and play was, for him, virtually nonexistent. When Alexander and I would peek into Daddy’s studio and see him through a bluish haze of cigarette smoke, pounding away at the piano surrounded by Betty and Adolph, or by Jerry Robbins, Arthur Laurents, and Steve Sondheim, it was hard to distinguish that scene from the one around the living room piano after dinner, when those same pals all clustered around our father to bawl out silly songs and make one another laugh. Daddy effortlessly and inevitably became the center of attention; he never seemed to tire of it.

But Mummy could get tired. Over time, she developed a habit of “slipping away,” as she put it, without saying good night. Daddy was always the last one standing. He couldn’t sleep anyway; his was an engine that would not, could not shut itself off. He had terrible insomnia, and in my early years he was already well into his lifelong dependence on sleeping pills. But then, all the grownups took sleeping pills in those days.

Daddy did most of his composing during his sleepless night hours. I wasn’t born yet when he wrote *Fancy Free*, which led to *On the Town*; nor was I around for his first two symphonies or his

one-act opera, *Trouble in Tahiti*. And I was unaware of the pieces he was writing during the first few years of my life: his concert work *Serenade*; his second Broadway show, *Wonderful Town*; the score to the film *On the Waterfront*; his jazzy piece *Prelude, Fugue, and Riffs*. The first works I was just barely conscious of Daddy composing were two musicals he was writing simultaneously: *Candide* and *West Side Story*.

Candide opened first, in 1956. I was four. I remember my parents all dressed up one night; clearly they were about to do something exciting. “Where are you going?” I asked. “We’re going to see *Candide*!” Mummy said, with a little shiver of anticipation.

They were going to see candy? That sounded wonderful. “I want to go, too!” I said. “No, darling, this is for grownups.” Candy—for grownups? Impossible. “But I want to see the candy! *I want to see the can-dee . . . !*” I was still kicking Julia’s shins in the throes of my tantrum as my parents scurried out the door in their opening-night finery.

The following summer, while Daddy was working feverishly to finish the *West Side Story* score, Mummy escaped the heat of the city (and the show) by taking me down to Chile to visit her family. While I played with my cousins, Lenny and Felicia kept in touch through letters. One of them that arrived was addressed to me.

July 23: DERE JAMIE: IT IS VERY HOT HERE AND HUMIT AND I SURE WISH WE WERE ALL SKI-ING IN THE ANDEES MOUNTINS, INSTED OF WRITING THIS *FUKING SHOW. I DON’T LIKE JERY ROBINS. YESTERDAY WE HAD OUR FURST READING AND EVERYONE IS HISTERICAL. I HOPE AFTER YOU GO TO BREERLY YOU CAN SPEL BETER THAN THIS. KIS MUMMY A LOT FOR ME . . . I ADORE

YOU. WRITE TO ME! YOUR LOVING, LONELY FATHER, LENNUHTT.

*censored

I was too young to see *West Side Story* on the Broadway stage, with its knife fights and scary gunshot at the end. But Alexander and I listened constantly to the recording on the little record player in our bedroom. We listened to all Daddy's shows. I loved *On the Town*,



Jamie holds Henry's leash at the stage door of Carnegie Hall.

with its goofy “Taxi Number” and the dreamy, melancholy “Lonely Town” ballet music that spoke to a place inside me no one knew about. *Wonderful Town* featured the song “A Quiet Girl,” which I was told my father had originally written as a lullaby to me—a delightfully inapt dedication as I was, by all accounts, the noisiest girl in the world. *Candide* had a thousand words we couldn’t follow, but the tunes were irresistible. Were we putting on the records, or was someone else putting them on for us? Either way, we came to know those scores by heart.

West Side Story was a Broadway hit and Leonard Bernstein’s fame increased—but later that same season, something else happened to him that I found far more impressive: not his first season as music director of the New York Philharmonic, but rather his presenting the orchestra’s traditional Young People’s Concerts, live, on *CBS network television*. As far as Alexander and I were concerned, nothing was more magical than being on TV.

“Don’t step on the cables,” warned whoever was holding my hand backstage at Carnegie Hall for the first live broadcast of a Young People’s Concert. I carefully lifted my party shoe over the anaconda-sized wires. Of the concert itself, I remember nothing, except that it began with the *Lone Ranger* theme, followed by Daddy explaining that the music had nothing to do with the Lone Ranger, at which point I stopped listening. Afterward, a lady knelt down in front of me and asked brightly, “Did you understand what your father was talking about?” “No,” I replied.

The Vineyard and Redding

It was in the summers that we came alive as a family. In those early years before Nina was born, we spent the summer months on the island of Martha's Vineyard, off the coast of Cape Cod.

But first we had to get there. It was a quasi-military operation, involving my mother driving the station wagon with Julia, Rosalia, and the maid; plus all of Rosalia's cooking utensils, which she insisted on bringing; plus duffel bags full of sheets and towels; plus the canary and the fish and the turtles and, of course, Henry the dachshund. Plus Alexander and me. The spillover went into Daddy's gray, yacht-sized Lincoln Continental convertible, a present from the car company that sponsored his television shows. The car was all button-operated—one of the first of its kind—and the buttons were always jamming and short-circuiting. But it was exceedingly glamorous.

One summer, we had so much stuff to transport to the Vineyard that a U-Haul trailer was affixed to the rear of the Lincoln. I rode along with Daddy, just the two of us: a treat. (I was still too young to fret over the fact that Leonard Bernstein was the most terrible, erratic, reckless driver on the planet.) We should have set out on the Connecticut Turnpike, which permitted our multiple-axled vehicle, but Daddy preferred the bucolic, truck-free serenity of the Merritt Parkway. So we took the Merritt, and were soon pulled over by a trooper. He pointed out that we were breaking the law, no trailers allowed, and asked for my father's license and registration. "Oh—you're the conductor? I saw you on the television!" On came the dazzling Lenny smile, the laser-beam charm.

Pretty soon the trooper was reminiscing about his violin lessons in elementary school, and shaking Daddy's hand, and oh, forget the ticket, Maestro, just take the next exit to the Connecticut Turnpike. A pleasure to meet you, sir! And off we went.

But the Maestro liked it on the Merritt, so we stayed on the Merritt. "Daddy, they're gonna arrest you! We're gonna be in trouble!" "Naw, it'll be fine, you'll see!" Soon enough came the siren and the flashing light, and once again we were getting pulled over.

Trooper, license, registration, Lenny laser beam, handshake, just take the next exit, Maestro—a pleasure to meet you, sir!

The man was blessed. But I was a shrunken ball of mortification—not for the first time and not for the last, by many a country mile.

The Weaver house, our rental on the figure-of-speech lagoon,



The family on the figure-of-speech lagoon, Martha's Vineyard.

was a paradise for Alexander and me. We shared endless make-believe games, indoors and out. Somehow I'd gotten the impression that "Casino" was a normal part of a restaurant name, so I invented a game where the house had three restaurants: Casino Fancy, Casino Medium, and Casino Sloppy. At Casino Fancy, in the dining room, you used supergood manners, and everything was just so, and you spoke with a fancy accent about fancy things. Casino Medium was so boring that we never went there. Casino Sloppy, outside the kitchen door, was the most fun: you could eat chicken with your fingers, wipe your mouth on your sleeve, and talk like a cowboy. Years later, we came to understand that these two restaurants were perfect manifestations of our parents: Casino Fancy was elegant and well behaved, like our mother, while Casino Sloppy was messy, spontaneous, a little naughty, and (we had to admit) more fun, like our father.

Actually, our father wasn't sloppy so much as clumsy. His siblings teased him about his "*lappes*"—Yiddish for paws. He spilled things; he forced objects and broke them; he never owned an audio system he didn't bust. And despite his prodigious gifts, he had no visual sense at all. He'd sported many god-awful, garish outfits until Felicia came along to civilize him. She bought many of his clothes, and surreptitiously hid or threw away the ones she disapproved of. Years later, we would open a blanket chest to find it stuffed with things like flocked orange sweaters and black leather bathing trunks: we'd accidentally discovered Felicia's burial ground for her husband's sartorial atrocities.

The Weaver house was full of guests, just as the Osborne always was. Betty Comden and Adolph Green would make their way up to the Vineyard every summer. *Betty and Adolph*: they were a crucial presence in our collective lives. Theirs was not a romance, in the traditional sense—they each married other people and raised



Adolph, Betty, and Lenny in *On the Town* days.

their own families—but it was a lifelong partnership. They wrote screenplays, they wrote lyrics and dialogue for musicals, and they amused and inspired each other for over half a century.

Back in the 1930s, Betty and Adolph had paired up in a sketch comedy group called the Revuers, which also included the young actress Judy Holliday. Our father had gone to all their gigs at the Village Vanguard, sometimes accompanying them on piano. He taught us all the Revuers' sketches by heart; they became part of the family DNA.

We also knew about Lenny and Adolph's memorable first encounter, at a summer camp where nineteen-year-old "Uncle Lenny"

was the music counselor and Adolph had been imported from the Bronx to play the Pirate King in a production of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance*. Upon Adolph's arrival, Lenny began quizzing him on musical pieces, and rapidly discovered that *he could not stump Adolph*. Adolph knew everything—by heart, and all by ear—and he could sing anything from Tchaikovsky to Sibelius to a virtuosic, tongue-twisting rendition of “Flight of the Bumblebee.” Adolph was zany, quick on the trigger, deeply intellectual, and utterly unique. Lenny and Adolph became friends at that deep, mysterious level where humor, intellect, and aesthetic instinct all meet. It was a kind of true love that lasted all their lives.

As for Betty, she struck me as the last word in female self-possession. Whip-smart, with her glossy hair and stylish outfits, Betty was a true career girl who could crack wise like a living screwball comedy heroine. From my listening post in bed at night, I could hear how often Betty's voice generated the gales of grownup laughter. She could play word games with Steve Sondheim, and not quaver. She could quote Shakespeare and Ibsen and Bugs Bunny. I wanted to be just like her.

A piano was set up for Daddy in a big airy room above the Weaver house garage. (In exchange for Leonard Bernstein's endorsement of Baldwin Pianos, the company provided him with a piano wherever he went in the world.) Daddy announced that Alexander and I were going to help him write a show. We didn't get far in the collaboration, but I remember my father at the piano, playing something we were “working on,” and as I casually leaned my little elbow into the crook of the piano in that room above the garage, I felt—oh, I felt just like Betty Comden!

Mike Nichols would also visit every summer. He was a family favorite: witty and hilarious with our parents, warm and amusing with us kids. Once, when we were devising awful, imaginary ice

cream flavors, Mike came up with the yummiest one of all: “liver ripple.”

One weekend, I was going around the room offering all the grownups scalp massages. When I got to Mike, he demurred. I insisted, telling him he’d really like it. He said no, thanks. I continued insisting until Daddy suddenly raised his voice sharply: “*JAMIE! He says he doesn’t want a scalp massage!*”

Daddy never yelled at us; Alexander and I were horrified. We ran upstairs and cried in our room. Daddy came up a few minutes later, sat on Alexander’s bed across from mine, and explained to us that when Mike was a little boy, he got a bad disease that caused all the hair on his body to fall out and never grow back. So he wore a wig and false eyebrows. And he had no eyelashes—which, we then understood, gave him that slightly peculiar gaze.

I was mortified at what I’d done: the kind of mortification that makes you moan involuntarily every time you recall it. It took me a while to feel comfortable again in Mike’s presence, but his calm, affable ways and irresistible hilarity nudged me past my embarrassment.

Another frequent guest was the playwright Lillian Hellman, who had her own house on the Vineyard. It was in those years that she and my father were collaborating on *Candide*. The idea for the musical was Lillian’s; she’d suggested using Voltaire’s eighteenth-century satirical novella to mock the House Un-American Activities Committee’s Spanish Inquisition–like persecution of left-leaning artists. The collaboration was a lengthy torture, but Lillian and my father managed to stay friends mostly due to Mummy, who adored Lillian and put up with her brusque, growling ways.

Henry the dachshund hated Lillian; the minute she stepped through the door he’d lunge for her ankle, a reaction Alexander and I viscerally understood. Everything about Lillian Hellman

was scary: her craggy face with the big, irregular teeth; the way her mouth turned down at the corners when she let loose with her gravelly laugh, “HAWWW, HAWWW, HAWWW.” It was enough to make you jump out the window. Upstairs in the Weaver house, Alexander and I would sit opposite each other on our bedroom floor, look at each other intensely, and whisper the dreaded words, “*Lillian Hellman!*”—triggering a mutual laughing fit that would leave us clawing the floorboards, gasping for breath.



Jamie with Lillian Hellman, Martha's Vineyard.

Some years later in New York, Nina was in the library with our mother and Lillian while the two ladies were having tea. Mummy told Nina that Lillian had been appointed her godmother. “That’s right, kid,” Lillian told my five-year-old sister. “When the plane goes down, I getcha.” Imagine Nina’s alarm.

The whole business of godparents was decidedly unofficial; it mainly served as a way for our parents to honor those closest to them. My own appointed godfather, composer Marc Blitzstein, had bonded with my father years earlier over music and politics; both were composers and confirmed lefties. (Harvard senior Lenny Bernstein had made a name for himself by presenting Marc’s inflammatory musical *The Cradle Will Rock*.) Bald, spry, and twinkly-eyed, Marc showed up in the Vineyard one summer in time to participate in an elaborate home movie my parents and Uncle BB were devising, entitled “Call Me Moses.” Marc played the Egyptian slave driver who whipped the Jewish slaves into building the pyramids—all of this being filmed on the beach by cinematographer Uncle BB using his 8-mm movie camera. Lenny took over as the shaky cameraman for the scenes in which his brother played the starring role of Moses, in full Orthodox Jewish regalia, *payis* included. On-screen, Lenny played the cruel pharaoh, in a regal lampshade crown, lusting after Moses’s girlfriend, played by Uncle BB’s actual girlfriend (and eventual wife) Ellen, all be-robed in white sheets. Felicia, in a Cleopatra-style wig, played the pharaoh’s wife, who lusted after Moses. Felicia masterminded these complex home movies, devising the shooting script and collecting all the props. On-screen, she was riveting; with her Chaplin-grade talent for body language and exaggerated facial expressions, Felicia Montealegre was born to play silent films.

Alexander and I got bit parts as Daddy-the-cruel-pharaoh’s children. In our big scene, he was distractedly playing cards with

us until, spying the nubile Ellen, he knocked us kids unceremoniously to the side (a little too vigorously: Alexander cried). The climax of the film, the Red Sea chase, was filmed on the lagoon, with the two brothers taking turns filming from the motorboat while each of the characters made it across the Red Sea—or didn’t—on water skis.

Steve Sondheim directed several of our Vineyard home movies, the greatest of which was an excerpt from the opera *Tosca*, in which Tosca (Mummy) murders the wicked Scarpia (Daddy, sporting a dastardly mustache applied with a burned cork). The innovation on that film was the addition of sound: our parents lip-synched to the Maria Callas and Tito Gobbi recording.

Steve visited every summer. He had been the “kid” collaborator on *West Side Story*: a mere twenty-seven to Lenny’s and Jerry Robbins’s thirty-nine and Arthur Laurents’s forty. But Steve held his own. His powers of wordplay were prodigious, and he was madly witty at every party, often slouched on a couch, squinting through his cigarette smoke and making cutting remarks. With his slightly disheveled way about him, he was not exactly cuddly.

There was an enormous party at the Weaver house when Daddy turned forty. Steve devised a complex treasure hunt; all the grownups were outside, dashing around in the dusk, screaming with laughter. Daddy also received a birthday song from Steve, with the lyric: “You’re only as old as you look—and you look . . . forty.”

* * *

My father loved the water: swimming in it, water-skiing over it, or steering a boat across it. He was particularly fond of sailing. One Vineyard afternoon it was just him and me on the *Janie*, a little sailboat that came with the house. As we drifted across the lagoon in figure-of-speech conditions, Daddy said, “Isn’t it

marvelous out here, just the two of us? Oh, I can just imagine, though, when you're a teenager, I'll say, 'Would you like to go for a little sail with your old pappy?' And you'll say, 'Oh, but *DAD*-dy, Jim's invited all the kids on his yacht, and I really want to go!' And I'll say, 'Aw, but don't you want to go for just a little spin with your old, old pappy?' And you'll say, 'Oh, but *DAD*-dy, *all* the kids are going on Jim's yacht!' And away you'll go, leaving your poor old pappy all alone."

I thought about this for a moment, then replied, "Well . . . let's make the best of it now." My father roared with laughter and gave me a suffocating hug. I wasn't sure why what I'd said was so funny; was he hoping I'd reassure him that I'd never act that way as a teenager? But how could I know what life would be like in that remote future? I figured he had to know more about it than I did.

He knew more than I did about everything, of course—especially music. But music was something he wanted me to learn. I understood that it was my fate to take piano lessons, which commenced that very summer. My teacher was Shirley Gabis, a friend of my father's from his student days at the Curtis Institute. After one of my early lessons, my father sat me on his lap and said, "Well, you'll never be a great pianist." Shirley was appalled; why did he say that—even as a joke? Still, I blundered along with my lessons: not particularly enjoying them, but with a docile acceptance that it was something I had to do, like brushing my teeth or going to the doctor.

One summer when our father had to leave the Vineyard early and go conduct somewhere, he wrote a song to remind us of him. Mummy was at the piano, while Alexander and I sang the words, and we would perform it for all the visiting houseguests. Daddy's lyrics went:

*Evening, when it's booze time
That's the time we think of Daddy
Nighttime, when it's snooze time
That's the time we dream of Daddy*

*Where is that funny face
Where is that fatty*

*Soon, soon, in September
We will booze again, we will snooze again
With Daddy . . . Daddy . . . Daddy . . .*

In the last Vineyard summer, just before I turned nine, there was a scary moment when Mummy was overcome with a terrible stomachache and had to be taken to the hospital in Oak Bluffs. Alexander and I weren't allowed inside her room, but we could wave at her through a window. We were frightened at the time, but a few weeks later we found out, to our delight, that she was pregnant.

Nina was born in New York City the following February. I'd had my piano lesson that afternoon, and Shirley Gabis stuck around to count the contractions. When our mother left for the hospital around nine p.m., I made Julia promise to wake me up if the baby was born during the night. Sure enough, Julia opened my door at about one in the morning. I sat right up in bed and asked hopefully, "Is it a girl?" Julia's face darkened, and she mimicked back at me, "*Is it a girl!?*" and slammed the door. In true Latin American form, she'd been hoping for another *niñito*.

* * *

The next summer, our family had a little country house of our own in West Redding, Connecticut. Daddy named the house the

Apiary—a reference not to bees but to the Bernstein siblings’ lifelong obsession and identification with apes. They called themselves the Apes, and “Don’t be an ape!” was a common saying in our house. Uncle BB often made reference to that underappreciated baroque composer A. P. E. Bach. And we called Ed Sullivan, the TV variety show host, Ape Solomon. (That last one was also an homage to our grandpa Sam, who managed to render every notable person Jewish: he referred to Adlai Stevenson as “Steve Adelman”; even President Eisenhower became “President Eisenberg.”)

The Apiary was on a steep, wooded hill where Alexander and I devised make-believe games using the trees, the rocks, the brook



Felicia in curlers, in the days before her sun allergy.

down the hill as the scenery and props of our inventions. Most of our fantasies were about life in a small town, where we ran little stores or walked to work, waving genially to each other along the way. In our real life, we felt some vague differentness: we knew our parents weren't quite like other parents. What was more, we lived in the city, not in the suburbs, where the families on our favorite TV shows resided. We longed to be like the "normal" people we saw on TV; so Alexander and I created that illusion for each other in the woods.

One afternoon, Daddy hauled his portable record player down the rocky path to the swimming pool so he could listen to a recording of Mahler's Fourth Symphony while he studied the score. He was planning to reintroduce the long-neglected music of Gustav Mahler to his New York Philharmonic audiences in the fall. The conductor on the recording was Bruno Walter—the very maestro who had conveniently caught the flu and given Leonard Bernstein his big conducting break back in 1943. Now, nearly two decades later, Daddy sat in the sun in his bathing suit, with a fresh pack of L&M's on the little table next to his lounge chair, following the recording with the score in his lap while his children splashed in the pool. As the record played, Daddy pointed out the kid-friendly features of the symphony to Alexander and me. "You hear that jingling? That's sleigh bells! Listen—here they come again!" In the last movement, he told us that the soprano was describing a child's vision of heaven.

Meanwhile, up the hill in the house, Mummy was performing her magic trick of silencing baby Nina's cries by playing a Brahms intermezzo on the piano. She looked so beautiful while playing those swoony, melancholy pieces by Chopin, Schumann, and Brahms. But her visits to the piano had been dwindling. She used to play duets with Daddy, but Mummy told us it now made her too nervous.

We'd begun to understand that our mother harbored fear. She told us she suffered from stage fright, and that was why she'd been turning down acting jobs recently. She was afraid of heights; she nearly expired over Daddy's prank of balancing four-year-old Alexander on an overhanging gargoyle at the top of Notre-Dame Cathedral. Mummy was terrified of airplanes; she crossed herself on takeoff and landing, and in between she clutched the armrests in a grim panic. There was a strange new darkness hovering at the edges of our mother's demeanor and we avoided inspecting it too carefully.

That summer in Redding, Mummy played the piano more than usual: not just to soothe baby Nina, but also because Daddy was away at the MacDowell Colony, the artists' retreat in New Hamp-



Just a normal pair of parents.

shire, working on his third symphony. When he drove back down to Redding, he arrived with not one but *two* puppies in his car! (By then, Henry the Second was no longer with us.) Daddy explained that they were “mongrels”—a nice new word—and that their names were Franny and Zooey, siblings from a book. We were besotted with our beautiful new puppies: Zooey for Alexander and Franny for me. Our mother was considerably less enthusiastic.

The “mongrels” turned out to be part German shepherd, and before you could say J. D. Salinger, Franny and Zooey got really, really big. When it was time to return to the city in the fall, our mother announced that Franny and Zooey were not coming with us. This was increasingly the pattern: Daddy would do something impulsive that got us all excited, and then Mummy felt compelled to be responsible and ruin the fun. Alexander and I were heartbroken, but now I can well imagine what was going through our mother’s mind as her husband pulled that pair of energetic creatures out of the back seat of his car.

* * *

Aunt Shirley got me hooked on reading. She’d drive me to the little Mark Twain Library a few miles away, where I’d replace the three Nancy Drew books I’d devoured over the past few days, and pull out the next three from the shelf. But on the way home from the library, Shirley often took us on a detour to the general store, where Alexander and I were permitted to assemble a magnificent pile of penny candy for what she dubbed our Cavity Party. Back at the house, the three of us would sit in a circle on the living room floor with the candy in the middle and eat it all. Shirley wasn’t entirely like a grownup.

At the end of that summer Daddy turned forty-four—and to celebrate the occasion, Shirley helped Alexander and me cook up a

birthday entertainment in Redding. (She was no doubt remembering her own childhood summers, when Daddy conscripted Shirley and all the neighborhood kids into ambitious productions of *Carmen* and *The Mikado* at their lakeside community in Sharon, Massachusetts.) Our presentation was to be a takeoff on our favorite Sunday night TV program: *The Ape Solomon Show*. Alexander played Ape himself; I played guest star Jimmy Durante, sporting a big rubber schnozzola and performing a song I'd made up, affecting Durante's signature rusty Lower East Side voice. We persuaded Rosalia, the cook, to come out and do the commercial for Helena Rubinstein hand cream; she gleefully recited our purple-prosed ad copy with her outlandish Chilean pronunciation. Rosalia was a good sport; Julia wouldn't have dreamed of participating in such antics. (Daddy was such a big Rosalia fan that he christened a ship in *Candide* after her—the *Santa Rosalia*—and named a Sharks girl Rosalia in *West Side Story*.)

Our show concluded with Alexander and me singing lyrics I'd written to the tune of "Hey, Look Me Over":

*Oh, happy birthday, dear Daddy-O,
I guess that life just doesn't go so slow.
'Cause you're already forty-four years old,
But you can conduct, and you can compose,
And you can still be bold! [arrghh]*

*And you'll grow like a beanstalk, high on a vine
Don't work so hard but take a tip from mine [sic]:
Way down deep in your heart you're not growing old,
So listen to our words:
Happy birthday . . . happy birthday, Daddy-Ooooo!!!*

Park Avenue and Fairfield



Lenny and Felicia on their way to something elegant, vamping it up in the elevator vestibule for Jamie's Instamatic camera.

Between the birth of our baby sister and Daddy's high-profile job as conductor of the New York Philharmonic (about to become even higher-profile upon the orchestra's move to its new home in Lincoln Center), it was time for our family to move to a bigger, fancier apartment.

When school began in the autumn of 1962, Alexander and I were newly residing in a penthouse duplex at 895 Park Avenue. We had our own rooms now, while Julia and baby Nina shared a third bedroom. The bedrooms, plus Daddy's studio, were all

downstairs, while the living room, library, dining room, and kitchen were upstairs: an upside-down house. My bedroom had three windows facing west, offering me a sunset over Central Park every single day—plus, I had one window facing south, where I could look straight down Park Avenue. There was so much light drenching the enormous apartment, it felt as if an intensely bright beam were being trained upon us. Our whole family life seemed somehow ratcheted up.

We sensed that Mummy was taking her role of Mrs. Maestro much more seriously. Her new walk-in closet was a marvel of treasures: Chanel suits, Dior evening dresses, a parade of elegant shoes and purses—all that glittering armor for the myriad events she attended and hosted. Even her hairdo from the Kenneth salon seemed blonder, the swept-up French twist somehow more regal. When she sat at her desk, immaculately dressed, one hand holding



Felicia on the phone in her bedroom on Park Avenue.

the phone receiver to her ear, the fingers of the other hand extending her cigarette ceilingward as she intoned, “Hello, this is Mrs. Leonard Bernstein calling . . .,” well, she was formidable. (Years later, I gasped in recognition to see Betty Draper on *Mad Men* assume this exact posture.)

Mummy seemed invincible to me, but maybe she was having some pangs of insecurity—for despite her unerring eye for design, she sought professional assistance in raising penthouse A to a higher level of grandeur. We always had to shake hands and be very polite to Mr. Irvine, who was stuffed into his pin-striped suit like a sausage into a casing. A noted interior designer, Keith Irvine talked our mother into some uncharacteristically flamboyant decisions. The dining room had Clarence House wallpaper and matching drapes depicting birds of paradise perched along vivid floral braids. The dining table was made entirely of mirrors, surrounded on two sides by a claret-toned corduroy banquette, itself backed by a mirrored shelf holding crystal candelabras and a collection of antique mercury glass orbs. The walls behind the banquette were mirrors, reaching all the way to the ceiling. At a dinner party, amid the dazzle of crystal, the gleaming silverware, the flowers and mercury glass and vaulting birds of paradise, all multimirrored in candlelight—the effect was downright magical. That dining room really *was* Casino Fancy.

By now, our parents had become socially beholden to many people who were not close friends. To erase all the pesky obligations at a single blow, Mummy came up with a solution she dubbed “monster rallies”: large dinner parties, with extra tables set up in the Casino Fancy dining room. Alexander, Nina, and I steered clear of those events, hiding downstairs throughout. But there was one monster rally we heard about at dinner the next day.

Herman Shumlin, a theater producer of fidgety disposition, was

already a sort of verbal family mascot. Uncle BB loved the name so much that he took every opportunity to shoehorn it into the conversation: "I'll be back before you can say Herman Shumlin." At this particular dinner party, Mr. Shumlin was seated with three other people at a small, elegantly arrayed table that was actually a very humble folding card table underneath. Mr. Shumlin had been unwittingly kicking at the butterfly wing nut that set the table at its higher-up position. He eventually managed to kick the wing nut all the way around, whereupon the table abruptly and deafeningly



Felicia lights the candles in the Casino Fancy dining room.

crashed down to its lower position, dumping Mr. Shumlin's entire dinner onto his lap. There was a great commotion, and while the serving staff cleaned everything up, Mummy took her guest downstairs and lent him a pair of Daddy's trousers. Mr. Shumlin reentered the dining room to general applause from the other guests, and he sat down to a nicely reset table and a fresh plate of food. This was a pretty great story to hear about the next day—and too good to be true that this festive calamity had happened to *Herman Shumlin*! But the best part, the part that still brings tears of joy to our eyes, the part that enshrines the story forever . . . is that ten minutes later, fidgety Herman Shumlin kicked the table down *again*.

One keen advantage for Mummy in the move across town was that Helen Coates, our father's secretary, now had to make distinct appointments to come over to our house, to deal with his correspondence and "have him," as she would put it, for a few hours.

"Nanny" Helen lived in an apartment on the other side of the Osborne building and used to spend some hours at Daddy's desk nearly every day. She had been one of Daddy's first piano teachers, eventually turning her life over to him with the fervor of a nun devoting herself to God. She was prissy and persnickety, with an odd little nervous whinny peppering her speech. She kept every Lenny-related letter, photo, article, and concert program, inserting them all into tidy, labeled albums. Today they comprise a priceless trove, lovingly preserved at the Library of Congress. But she was terribly possessive of her Lenny; not surprisingly, she'd advised him against marrying Felicia. Now, with our move to Park Avenue, Helen was considerably less underfoot, much to our mother's relief.

Helen was but one of the many people looking after Leonard Bernstein. He had a tailor named Otto Perl, a spry Viennese who



Baby Jamie with Helen Coates.

made house calls for fittings of suits and concert tails. (I found out he was a survivor of Dachau *and* Buchenwald—yet such a jolly man.) There was Dr. Z, a chiropractor for Daddy's chronic bad back. During the session, we kids played under the folding massage table, flinching each time Dr. Z got a resounding *crack* out of Daddy's vertebrae.

And there was Rita the Popper. Her job, and skill, was to twist one little hank at a time of Daddy's hair around her forefinger and yank it suddenly, which would pull the scalp away from the skull with a sickening little *pop*. Daddy grimaced with every pull, but he

put up with Rita the Popper's visits; her treatment, which helped circulate the blood between skull and scalp, was supposed to help keep his famous hair on his head. (And since he kept some hair on his head to the very end, Rita the Popper may as well get the credit.)

Our father also had a colorful assortment of valets and chauffeurs. There was Luis, who affixed little organizing signs onto Daddy's closet shelves. Alexander and I were enchanted by "fancy dress shirst" [*sic*]. There was a chauffeur with the august name of Frederick Stammers, who was so handsome that when he drove the convertible, he got more attention than Daddy did. Stammers was soon dismissed. Then there was "Lucky" Bob Beckwith, who stole Daddy's Lincoln—and cuff links—until he was stopped for a routine speeding violation in Florida, where it further emerged that he was AWOL from the army. By comparison, Michael, the jovial Cockney from England, seemed like an elder statesman. We loved when he talked about the "wheews" of the car. And we were all willing to overlook the fact that during his off-hours, in a squalid storage room off the back hall, he would spy on neighbors using the powerful stargazing telescope Steve Sondheim had given our parents for Christmas.

Another Daddy helper—albeit an inanimate one—was his sunlamp. He would lie under it on the floor of his bathroom, chatting with us while he cooked himself in that strange, smelly, violet light.