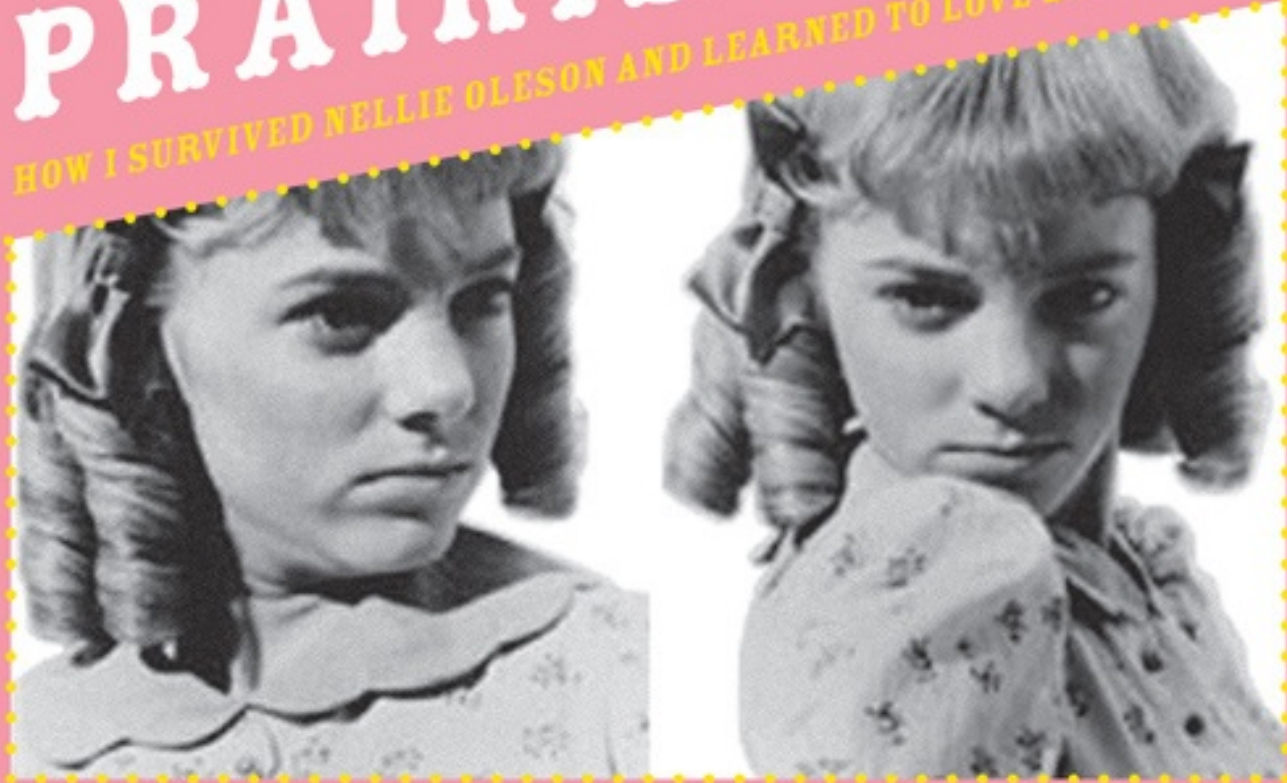




ALISON ARNGRIM

CONFESSIONS PRAIRIE BITCH

HOW I SURVIVED NELLIE OLESON AND LEARNED TO LOVE BEING HATED



Confessions of a Prairie Bitch

How I Survived Nellie Oleson and Learned to Love Being Hated

Alison Arngrim

 HarperCollins e-books

**For Jess:
The Pig Woman speaks at last.**

{AND}

**For Lucy:
I think I understand you a little bit more every day.**

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INTRODUCTION

The Los Angeles County Fair is probably not the first place you'd go if you were seeking to be forgiven of your sins, but I have a tendency to find strange things in strange places. Or, more accurately, they find me.

A few years ago, the fair decided to host a celebrity autograph show as a novelty attraction. Plunked down in a tent, right there with the Ferris wheels, prize-winning cows, and endless fried food, fairgoers could also find their favorite TV celebrities happily chatting away and signing our names on stacks of eight-by-ten glossies. My husband, Bob, and I thought this would be a fun way to spend the day (besides, they gave us free tickets, so we could go on all the rides afterward). So, as we were sitting there in the intermittently air-conditioned tent, passing the time with some of the most amusing celebs—Pugsley from *The Addams Family* is always a delight!—a woman strolled in and stopped dead in her tracks.

She stood, frozen in front of my table, not moving, not speaking, just staring down at the signature with my name on it. Then she slowly looked up at me. She was perhaps in her early forties, with long hair, casually dressed in jeans and some sort of vaguely western shirt, like 90 percent of the people I had seen at the fair that day.

She looked like someone who'd spent a lot of time in the sun. But I couldn't tell if she was really sunburned or not, because she was so incredibly angry that her face was turning several different colors, one after the other. She quickly went from what seemed to be abject shock and horror to boiling rage. She was even shaking. She shut her eyes and took several long, deep breaths through her nose, in an obvious effort to compose herself. She then swallowed hard and opened her eyes. I thought she was going to burst into tears, but she held her head up proudly, looked at me, and announced in a seriousness, "I forgive you!"

Then she turned on her heels and marched out of the tent. No autograph, no "Hi, how are you?" No "Loved your show!" Nothing.

Bob, who, after more than fifteen years of being married to me, had come to accept these scenes with a Zen-like sense of bemusement, said matter-of-factly, "You know, we *really* have to start bringing the video camera to these things."

I was still openmouthed in amazement. "What the hell was THAT?!"

Bob looked on the bright side. "Well, she forgave you. Of course, she didn't really say for what. Maybe for everything you've ever done? That's great! My God, you've just been absolved at the L.A. County Fair! How many people can say that?"

"You have a point," I replied. "Maybe they should advertise:

'The L.A. County Fair—where you can receive complete absolution and eat a deep-fried Snickers bar at the same time!'"

We laughed, but we both knew what she meant. This woman didn't know me. She had never seen me before in her life. She had no knowledge of what transgressions I may or may not have actually committed. But she knew what *She* had done. Bob and I knew she was talking about *Her*.

Nellie Oleson.

A grown woman had been driven to a state of rage and was forgiving me for what I'd done on television...while pretending to be someone else...nearly thirty years ago.

Welcome to my world.

~~I live every day with the knowledge that what was supposed to have been simply a really good gig, a major role on a long-running TV series, with lots of good times and fun memories, has instead morphed into a bizarre alternate version of reality, where I am repeatedly held to account for the actions of a fictitious character as if they were my own. And not just any character. A bitch. A horrible, wretched, scheming, evil, lying, manipulative, selfish brat, whose narcissism and hostility toward others knew no bounds. A girl who millions of people all over the world had grown to hate. But she was a girl I grew to love.~~

And why wouldn't I? She's given me everything I've ever wanted and more. She put food on my table, clothes on my back, and a roof over my head for most of my life. She got me out of my house when I thought there was no escape. She aided and protected me like no other creature, real or imagined. She transformed me from a shy, abused little girl afraid of her own shadow to the in-your-face, outspoken, world-traveling, politically active, big-mouthed bitch I am today. She taught me to fight back, to be bold, daring, and determined, and, yes, to be down-right sneaky when I needed to be.

Despite the occasional outburst and stray can of soda thrown at my head, I meet people from all over the world who grew up watching *Little House on the Prairie* (and still watch it) and tell me the most amazing things about what the show means to them. There was the chef of a four-star restaurant who grew up watching it in Bangladesh and the bookstore manager from Borneo who told me his grandmother still watches the show in their village. Then there's the man who grew up on an island near Singapore, where his family, who had electricity for only a few hours a day, used it to watch *Little House*. They had one of the few TVs in the town, and the neighbors would gather in front of their house and stare through the living room window to watch the show. I was in a bar in New York where the bartender was from Israel, the waitress was from Argentina, and the manager was from Iran. They compared notes on their favorite episodes. I receive fan mail regularly from Poland, Germany, Japan, Argentina, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and dozens of other countries. The show is popular in both Iran and Iraq. I am told that even Saddam Hussein was an avid fan and never missed an episode (I have not heard from Osama bin Laden, but I read that he used to like *Bonanza* when he was young, so what are the odds? Did even he follow Michael Landon's Little Joe all the way to the prairie?)

I know several totally unrelated people who have never met each other, who each told me a heart-wrenching story of terrible illness or incapacitation—horrible tragedies involving car accidents, full-body casts, cancer, severe depression, blood diseases. But all their tales had one thing in common: each of them, while lying in bed, unable to move and on the verge of giving up all hope, had turned on *Little House on the Prairie*. They watched episode after episode, forgetting about their pain and gradually recovering their strength and sometimes even their will to live.

I cannot count the number of people who have told me that *Little House on the Prairie* saved their lives or the number of ways people have incorporated it into their lives, going so far as to name their children Laura and Mary and, of course, Michael. But no Nellies. I have heard from people who name their cats and even their cows Nellie, but they don't dare name their daughters after her.

Well, I, for one, am happy I was "the Nellie." No, not just happy, proud. And eternally grateful. All I can say is, thank you. It's like I tell people at my stand-up shows: by making me a bitch, you have given me my freedom, the freedom to say and do things I couldn't do if I was "a nice girl" with some sort of stupid, goody-two-shoes image to keep up. Things that require courage. Things that require balls. Things that need to be done. By making me a bitch, you have freed me from the trivial, sexist, bourgeois prison of "likeability." Any idiot can be liked. It takes talent to scare the crap out of people.

And if enjoying that as much as I do makes me a bitch, well, *goody*. Playing Nellie and being marked a bitch for life is the best thing that ever happened to me. I constantly hear actors complain about being strongly identified with a character they played ages ago. They reject the character, refuse to talk about “that old show,” and dismiss their fans as silly and “uncool.” Not me, buddy. It took me a long time to figure out which side my bread was buttered on, but once I did, I never turned back. I will happily, wholeheartedly embrace Nellie Oleson, *Little House on the Prairie*, and all the fans worldwide until the last bitchy breath leaves my body.

Perhaps now, in writing this book, I can finally explain how much it all meant to me. Sometimes people tell me that the reason they loved the show so much was because, sadly, their childhood journey wasn't like that.

Neither was mine.

And I've had people tell me they really needed Nellie Oleson in their lives. *Nowhere as much as I did...*

MOM, DAD, AND LIBERACE

LAURA: My pa works hard.

NELLIE: So does a mule.

I always envy people whose detailed memories extend back to the womb. What I remember most are places. When I was growing up, my parents, my older brother, Stefan, and I usually moved at least once a year, so I can always tell how old I was at a particular time by where we were living.

The Chateau Marmont? Ages three through five. Famous stage and screen comedienne Beatrice Lillie attended my fifth birthday party. Waring Avenue off La Cienega? Ages five through seven. Carlton Way in the Hollywood Hills? I was eight. That would be the party with the plastic Day-Glo Indian headdresses.

The earliest memory I can come up with is from when I was about three. We had only recently moved to L.A. from New York and were living at the Chateau Marmont in Bungalow B. (No, that's not the one where John Belushi died. That was Bungalow D.) I was watching *Peter Pan*, not the Disney cartoon version, but the truly weird, almost creepy, televised play version with Mary Martin and Cyril Ritchard. (I still like those old 1960s "teleplays," Hallmark Hall of Fame, and that sort of thing. The video used at the time gives them a surreal, almost dreamlike quality.) I was totally fascinated with Captain Hook. He had all the best songs, like "Hook's Waltz" ("Who's the swiniest swine in the world?"). Every one was either a rollicking sea shanty or a tango. My favorite number in the whole show, however, was the bizarre sequence where Captain Hook and Peter Pan chase each other around a large papier-mâché tree, singing "Oh, My Mysterious Lady." A grown-up, somewhat older woman pretending to be a young boy, pretending to be a grown-up, younger glamorous woman by doing much more than prancing around with a green scarf over her head and singing in a very high register yet the guy in the pirate suit *believes her*. Wow. To me it was proof that grown-ups really are insane. And so began the launch of two major themes in my life: my love for and fascination with villains of all kinds and my total lack of respect for traditional definitions of gender.

By the time I was four, it was all over. My parents made a last-gasp effort to put those dainty ballerina candleholders on my birthday cake, but by that fall, the dreaded signs were there. Dainty was not my thing. I wanted to be a villain. Halloween was my favorite holiday. In previous years, they managed to stuff me into those cute Halloween baby-pajama costumes, so that I was dressed as a clown or some such cuddly character. But the minute I was old enough to pick out a costume, I wanted to be a witch with a big, pointy black hat. By the next year, I would insist on dressing as the devil himself.

I *looked* like a nice little girl. People were always getting me gifts like Mary Poppins dolls or teddy bears. But I loved action movies and would have much preferred something like the *Krakatoa: East Java Exploding Volcano Set*, complete with Maximilian Schell and Sal Mineo action figures. (Sadly,

there was no such set—I just always wished there was.)

~~One of the advantages to growing up in Hollywood in the 1960s was that one was allowed a great deal of latitude as far as weirdness was concerned. And at my house, weirdness was the order of the day. I know everyone thinks their parents are weird, but I may have an unfair advantage in the department. To start with, both of my parents were actors. And Canadian. (New game show: *Weird or Just Canadian? You Be the Judge!*) They married each other essentially on the grounds that they would never have to “behave themselves.” I can honestly say, when it came to this promise, they both succeeded admirably.~~

My parents got married in 1954 at the height of an era of total repression. The rules and expectations for married people, especially women, were staggering. I think if I had been around then I would have simply never gotten married at all. My mother, Norma Macmillan, as the daughter of a prominent Vancouver obstetrician-gynecologist, was expected to marry someone reasonably rich, educated, and preferably from the same type of neighborhood and private school background she had been brought up in. As a wife, she would be expected to severely limit, if not give up entirely, her career aspirations, such as acting and writing. She would also be expected to give up the usual things, like drinking, partying, and sleeping around. And there was the dreaded “cooking and cleaning” clause.

My mother could not cook. *At all*. I remember as a child having to show her how to fold the food back from the dessert on the Hungry-Man TV dinner. She told me that when she was growing up, her mother had forbidden her or her sister, my Auntie Marion, from participating in any cooking or cleaning around the house. They had staff for that sort of thing, don’t you know! Her mother told them, “Men will marry a woman to get free household help. I did not raise you to be maids. If a man wants to marry you, he can hire you a cook and a maid as befitting your station.” No, Grandma wasn’t kidding.

If my mother was considered all wrong as marriage material, my father would be a worst-case scenario. First of all, he was gay. Unlike most wives of gay men at the time, my mother was completely in on the game from the get-go. She had decided that gay, bi, or whatever, my father could offer her a better life than the stodgy Canadian straight boys available at the time. This doesn’t mean he was what you could actually call “out.” My father’s sexuality seems to have been something that was revealed to people on a case-by-case, need-to-know basis. (It was apparently decided that my brother and I didn’t need to know—although we figured it out pretty quickly.)

My father’s sexuality was hard to miss; he was a very, shall we say, “flamboyant” personality. He was always immaculately, fashionably dressed. As a child, when I first saw the TV show *The Odd Couple*, I thought the character of Felix Unger was based on my father. He had a lot of friends—many friends—most of whom seemed to be other handsome, well-dressed, flamboyant gentlemen in the artistic professions. Yet, if I or my brother commented about this, or even asked our parents outright, “perhaps there was something you would like to tell us,” we were given the brush-off. My father wasn’t gay. Oh yes, all of his friends were, of course. But no, not him. He was just...*theatrical*.

My dad had been born out of wedlock at the height of the Great Depression to a young Irish-Canadian woman who named him Wilfred James Bannin and put him in the Salvation Army orphanage. We later found out she did not simply abandon him; she worked in a restaurant and sent money to the orphanage every month for his upkeep. Sadly, it seems the orphanage totally ripped him off, and by the time my dad was adopted, he was suffering from rickets and malnutrition. (Yes, my father’s childhood is the plot of *Les Misérables*. This explains a great deal!)

He got adopted by an Icelandic-Canadian family with ten children, some their own, some

adopted, and was quickly nursed back to health and put to work milking cows, feeding livestock, and tending the crops. His new family renamed him Thor—not for the comic book hero, but for the original god of thunder. When you're Icelandic, being named Thor is like being named Joe. His full name was now Thorhäuler (pronounced "Tor-Huddler") Marvin Arngrimson. When it came to naming my father could not catch a break. Arngrim (he eventually changed it legally) was a little shorter and snappier—and fit better on the theater marquees.

He went to classes in a one-room schoolhouse, where he was related to half the other students by adoption, and even the teacher was a cousin. He learned to chop wood and churn butter and survive not only the Great Depression, but blizzards, locusts, and tornadoes.

Dad left home at fifteen to pursue his dream of working in the theater, much to his family's relief, no doubt. Between milking cows and plowing fields, he had insisted on putting on lavishly decorated spectacles in the barn, complete with stage lights made from milk cans. This sort of behavior was confusing to people in a small town like Mozart, Saskatchewan, and it frightened the animals.

He moved to Vancouver and became an actor and a producer and an entrepreneur and a "impresario"—basically, all of those things that don't require a high school education. He did very well, because he was willing to do absolutely anything to keep the theater open. One summer, he decided to "invent" air-conditioning. Well, not really, but close enough. It was a hot, humid summer and none of the other theaters on the same street had air-conditioning, so he saw a golden opportunity. He purchased a large block of ice and a really big fan. He positioned them in the attic of the theater, creating a primitive but effective cooling system, and proudly put out a sign: WE HAVE AIR CONDITIONING! It was a smash. The other theater owners were terribly jealous.

But not for long. The ice was heavy and unstable, and the theater was very old. One afternoon during a musical rehearsal, the block of ice came crashing through the ceiling and into the expensive rented piano. It just barely missed the actor and his accompanist who were rehearsing. They were not amused.

His "invention" of the drive-in theater went much better. The company was doing "Theater under the Stars," major theatrical productions with well-known actors performed in the park. The audience would sit on blankets and picnic. It was very successful. In fact, it was sold out. Then during one performance, it rained, and people started demanding their money back.

"Not on your life!" said my father. He convinced everyone to simply pull their cars up onto the grass, close to the stage. Unlike a drive-in, however, there were no speakers. People rolled down the windows and leaned out of them, straining to hear. The actors simply projected louder over the storm. Everyone thought it was a great novelty, and not a single ticket was refunded, which was a good thing because my father, I'm sure, had already spent every penny.

My father eventually founded his own theater, the Totem Theatre of Vancouver, with his friend Stuart Baker when one day he walked my mother. Dad and Stuart had become popular young producers in Vancouver, to the point that they were being referred to in the press as "The Gold Dust Twins." They were two of them were straight out of Mel Brooks's *The Producers*. My mother showed up at the theater and announced that the two of them had no idea how to actually run a business, and that she, having just graduated from the local business college, was capable of keeping their books correctly and thus keeping them both "out of jail." She told them she would happily keep the finances in order and run the office in exchange for the lead female role in every production. As my father said, "She made me an offer I couldn't refuse." So my mother became well known in Canada for her brilliant performance as Laura in Tennessee Williams's *Glass Menagerie* and in any other role she felt like having. (She sometimes let the other girls have a turn.)

The theater eventually ceased to be as profitable as they wanted, and my parents, having worked their way romantically through the entire theater company and most of Vancouver, realized it was time to get out of town. My father proposed to my mother on a used car lot. He must have had a hell of a sales pitch, because she agreed. They were married right away, with Stuart as best man. Then the three of them moved to Toronto to get fabulous new careers in radio. Back then, a career in radio was the happening thing to have. Saying you wanted to be on TV in the '50s would be like saying today that you wanted a show on the Internet. Interesting...but not yet profitable. My dad and Stuart were the ones with the contact; a friend had gotten them a meeting with a major producer. They only had a couple of radio credits between them, and my mother had none, but they decided to take her along to the meeting anyway, just in case. There might be a small part for her if they were lucky.

At the meeting, my father and Stuart gave their best pitch about why they should be big stars, and the producer seemed to be buying it. Then he asked my mother, "And what do you do?"

"I do children's voices," she replied without missing a beat. Stuart and my dad nearly had a seizure. They didn't know what the hell she was talking about. Children's voices? She'd never done any voices. The producer chatted with her politely, then told them he'd call.

When they left, my dad really let her have it. "Children's voices? Where in the hell did you come up with that bullshit?" He and Stuart thought she was nuts and hoped she hadn't ruined their chances.

The script soon arrived. They had all been hired to be in a new radio soap opera. They celebrated madly and began leafing through the script, seeing how many lines they had. My father shouted, "Look! I'm on page ten!" Stuart found his part: "I'm on page twenty and twenty-one!"

My mother sat silently, slowly turning the pages of her script. My father asked her, "Which page are you on?"

"All of them," she replied calmly.

It turned out the entire plot of the soap opera revolved around a disturbed little girl and her family's attempt to deal with the medical and psychological crisis. She was the little girl.

My father and Stuart soon learned to bow before her prowess in voice-over. Because she worked so much, she often had to run back and forth across the street from studio to studio in Toronto recording several programs and commercials at the same time. My brother, Stefan, was born in Toronto in 1955, so she was doing all this while carting around a newborn.

In the early 1960s, my mother became the voice of Gumby, the walking, talking "little green ball of clay." At this point, they had moved to New York and had been living there for a few years. She was also a ghost, Casper the Friendly Ghost, to be exact. Known by her maiden name, Norma Macmillan, she was one of the most prominent voice-over artists of the late '50s through the '60s. She played everybody. She was Sweet Polly Purebred, intrepid reporter and girlfriend of Underdog. She was Davey of *Davey and Goliath*, absolutely the world's most religious Claymation program ever made. (My mother used to joke, "C'mon, Goliath, let's go outside and *pray!*") With her high, childlike voice, she was also, by default, Davey's mom, his sister, and all his friends. She was Gumby's mom, his sister, and his blue friend Goo. She was nearly everyone in Casper's town with a voice over middle school—Nightmare, Wendy, and even Spooky. In fact, she was so many voices, that sometimes I could sit in front of the TV on Saturday mornings and hear her in every third cartoon. She was even in commercials. Before the hyperannoying Cocoa Puffs bird, there was a choo-choo train that shouted "Cocoa Puffs, Cocoa Puffs!" She was the little girl in that.

In 1962, while we were living in New York and shortly after I was born, she was cast in the first comedy album ever to mock a seated president, "The First Family," about JFK and Jackie and the whole gang starring stand-up comedian Vaughn Meader. She was the voice of Caroline Kennedy and

baby John-John. It sold so many copies so fast (seven and a half million, to be exact), it made the *Guinness Book of World Records* for fastest-selling album in history. It was played over loudspeakers in department stores and won the Grammy for Album of the Year. Even President Kennedy was said to have loved it.

A second *First Family* album was recorded and set to be released Christmas 1963, but, since JFK was killed on November 22, that was the end of that. The album disappeared from the air-waves, and poor Vaughn Meader's career never really recovered. It's still a major collector's item, and yes, that's my forty-year-old mom on the cover wearing knee socks and holding a balloon.

By the time I was in first grade, my mother was so well known in cartoons, that on the occasions she would walk me to school, the other kids would beg her to perform: "Do Gumby!" "Do Casper!" And there, in the school yard, at eight in the morning, in her coat and scarf, even on days she was fighting a hangover, she would smile bravely and say, "Hi! I'm Casper the Friendly Ghost, and I want to be your friend!" On some mornings she could even be persuaded to sing: "Where oh where has my Underdog gone? Oh where oh where can he be?" Not only were her early-morning performances impressive in quality, but I was amazed just by the fact she did them at all. I have to hand it to her, I don't know if I could have done that before my first cup of coffee.

I, of course, loved this. At that age, kids think you're nuts when you tell them your mother does Gumby. Having her come down to the school yard in person and *prove it* was more than I could even dream of. It gave me a smattering of what would pass for "street cred" in the first grade.

My mother was very beautiful, and she had that whole '60s style going. She had very, very dyed red hair, although I believe it was called strawberry-something. It was teased into a bouffant nuptial, unlike the hairdo of her cartoon character Sweet Polly Purebred. Because she liked to wear smart suits with three-quarter-length sleeves and black pumps, the resemblance was positively disturbing; the only difference at all was she was missing the big cartoon doggie nose. Sometimes I went with her to the hairdresser's, where her stylist would smoke endless Benson & Hedges while spraying her and the whole room with Aqua Net. I don't know how either of them was able to breathe. I nearly passed out.

My mother didn't do the usual "mommy" things. She wasn't into all the arts and crafts activities that other mothers so enjoyed. I can just imagine the look I would have gotten had I suggested she make me a Halloween costume. Mine all came from the store, until I got older and started making them myself. It wasn't really a problem, except for the Girl Scouts. All my school friends were in the Brownies, the lead-in to being in the Girl Scouts, and I wanted to join, too. My mother and I went to a meeting where the program directors explained the whole process, as well as their very pressing need for more den mothers.

This is where things went south. When we got home, my mother sat me down and told me very solemnly that we needed to talk. She explained that at the meeting, they had suggested that she become a den mother. She explained that if I joined my local troop, she would be expected to join and well and fulfill the duties of a scout den mother: driving girls around, going camping, making treats for meetings, helping with arts and crafts, etc.

She said, "I'm very sorry. I know you want to be a Brownie. But seriously, ask yourself, do you honestly see me as den mother material?" I was six, but I knew she was right. The images were horrifying: I tried to visualize her in a schoolroom, handing out little Dixie cups of Elmer's glue and glitter with her shaky hands, and I could just see the ensuing disaster. I saw her standing around in a supermarket parking lot helping me sell cookies, with the far away, sad, deadened look of someone who's been waiting in line at the DMV for several hours. Did I really think *she* was going to make lunches for a troop of twenty little girls? This was a woman who had trouble cutting the crusts off

peanut butter sandwiches, for God's sake.

~~I told her I understood. And I did. I did not join the Brownies, and I never became a Girl Scout.~~ In retrospect, I sincerely doubt I was what they were looking for either.

After we moved to Hollywood in 1965, Dad became a personal manager. This is like an agent only weirder. Being an agent is simple: you have clients; you get them jobs; they pay you 10 percent. The end. The personal manager's job is to "counsel and advise." But personal managers are not lawyers. They are different from business managers, who handle bank accounts and investments. They do not specifically procure employment. But they get paid 15 percent instead of 10. So what the hell does a personal manager actually do? If they're a bad one, not much at all. And if they're a good one, *Everything*.

The agent may get you the three-picture deal and negotiate for the raise and the bigger trailer. The publicist may get you the cover of *People*, but the manager is the one who will come in the middle of the night to bail you out of jail. The publicist might spin the story of your arrest to the press and try to make you sound innocent. But the manager will come before the cops arrive, flush the dog down the toilet, give the girl cab fare home, and wipe the prints off the gun. My father was a manager.

Before he started his own firm and became my manager, he worked for Seymour Heller and Associates. This was how he wound up working for Liberace.

It was 1969, so Liberace was famous by this time. Back in the '50s, he had his own TV show (called *The Liberace Show*; what else?) and was now touring to packed houses. As strange as it may seem to young people now, at the time, Liberace was in fact the highest-paid entertainer in the world. I had the hilarious privilege of going to see his show when I was just eight years old.

My parents prepared me for this by admonishing, "Now, whatever you do, don't say anything because no one must know that Liberace is gay."

"Excuse me?" I said. "I'm eight. I know he's gay." I thought they had to be kidding. No grown-up person really thought this guy was straight, did they?

"No, no!" they said. "His fans are in love with him. You mustn't say a word!"

I agreed to behave myself, under protest. If I thought hiding Liberace's gayness was a ludicrous proposition before I saw the show, I was absolutely in hysterics afterward. He came onstage in his pants—spangled, gleaming, red, white, and blue hot pants covered in sequins and rhinestones. He danced in this outfit and did a baton-twirling routine. He also had a floor-length cape that lit up. Really, it was wired with thousands of little bulbs. The house lights would go down, and he would blaze away like a Christmas tree. He wore elaborate makeup and gallons of hair spray. He sat at the piano and played (quite beautifully, by the way) and sang, simpering and winking and giggling throughout the entire show. And in case anyone still didn't get it, he raised his arms over his head, soared into the air, and flew across the stage.

Yet there they were, his legions of female fans, mostly older women dressed in fur coats and jewels, with that well-sprayed, perfectly coiffed, slightly blue hair that was considered cool at the time. I watched them in amazement at intermission as they scooped up all the merchandise. Liberace was crazy about merchandise. He was ahead of his time. People didn't sell things at concerts as much as they do today. But old Liberace did. He had records and coffee mugs—he even had soap, for the love of God, with his picture on it. I tried to imagine who in their right mind would actually get off on bathing with Liberace. It was too icky to contemplate. Yet as the cash registers rang furiously, I began to understand why Liberace's most famous quote was, "I cried—all the way to the bank!"

I overheard some of the fur-coated ladies talking. They paid no attention to the eight-year-old in the frilly yellow dress and white tights hovering near them. They assumed, of course, that my mother

must be nearby purchasing scads of Liberace merchandise, so I could eavesdrop with impunity. They whispered and giggled like teenagers, and I heard bits and pieces: “Oh, he IS!!” (Shriek!) “Just darling!” and finally, “You’d be safe with him!” followed by gales of laughter. THEY KNEW!

They didn’t call it “gay,” but they knew perfectly well what it was when they saw it. If you had walked up to any one of these women and asked flat out: “Is Liberace a homosexual?” she would have slapped you soundly across the face and screamed, “How DARE you!” But if you asked something along the lines of “So, why do you think he’s not married?” she would have winked at you and said “Oh, *really*, dear!” That’s how they liked it, and that’s how he gave it to them. Just as he floated over the stage, Liberace eternally hovered over the concepts of gayness and straightness, never really touching down on either side. It was genius.

THE CASTLE

NELLIE: My mother says we're not like the rest of the children.

The Chateau Marmont is probably not most parents' first choice as a place to raise their family, but like most actors, it was where we landed when we came from New York in 1965. It wasn't yet the infamous location of Belushi's death, but it was already notorious. For those who haven't been on the tour of Hollywood and seen it yet, the Chateau is a big, gorgeous pretend-French castle, sitting right smack in the middle of Hollywood on the Sunset Strip, surrounded by liquor stores, banks, and nightclubs. It really stands out. Built in the late '20s, it was meant to be a fashionable, high-end apartment building for very respectable people, but it became both semipermanent and total transient lodging for people in show business and those who *think* they are in show business. It not only has a fancy bar and restaurant and is frequented by many notorious, drunken, pants-dropping celebrities. This observation is not meant in a negative way or considered a sign of the Chateau falling from grace. It was always the home of notorious, drunken, pants-dropping celebrities.

I, of course, loved it from the minute I set eyes on it. All little girls of four and five think they are princesses, but I was the only one I knew who could tell people she really did live in a castle. We moved in just as the 1960s were breaking right there on the Sunset Strip. We had come to California because my older brother, Stefan, was supposed to star in the movie *The Singing Nun* with Debbie Reynolds. I say "supposed to" because between the time he was cast and the time shooting began, I grew and was deemed much too big—and therefore replaced. He then had to settle for playing Ki Douglas's son in *The Way West*. Stefan, who's six years older than I, had started acting when he was barely five, playing sad-eyed orphans on soap operas. This led to an article in a New York paper about "the theatrical Arngrim family: Dad's a monk, Mom's a ghost, and their son's an orphan!"

No one seemed to question the parts he got. I remember my mother proudly telling the story of how when he was very little, she had begged him to smile at an audition, to "try to look happy." He didn't, but when he came out of the reading, he was thrilled. "They didn't want a happy little boy! I got the part!" He worked like crazy, playing everything from the French war orphan on the series *Combat!* and the embarrassing illegitimate spawn on a soap opera to the moody "disturbed child." There was no shortage of parts for the cute boy with big, sad brown eyes, who looked like he had the whole world on his shoulders. But no one seemed to want to know *why* he looked that way.

By the time he was twelve, he was officially a "teen idol." He played Barry Lockridge in the Irwin Allen sci-fi cult classic *Land of the Giants*, released in 1968. Yet another in a series of unhappy orphans, Barry was on his way to a new family, when the suborbital plane he's on, the *Spindrift*, crashes on another planet, inhabited by, well, giants. He's then left to be raised by the crew and passengers of the ship, including Mr. Fitzhugh, the constantly sweating and panting "embezzler on the lam." Luckily, Barry had his faithful dog, Chipper, with him, resulting in endless scenes of his

shouting, “No! Chipper! Chipper, come back!” It was sort of like a warped, sci-fi version of *Gilligan’s Island*, but without the laughs. Stefan should have been happy then; he was making tons of money and was now world-famous. Yet he still managed to remain in a seemingly permanent state of gloom.

Living with an official teen idol was very bizarre. Every month he was in one of the magazines—all of them—*16*, *Tiger Beat*, *Teen Beat*—they all seemed to blur into one big mass of teenage girl squeal speak: “Who’s your Fav?” and pages and pages of “Luv,” “Fax,” and “Pix,” all “cos they’re the grooviest!” I did not think my brother or anything he did was remotely “groovy.”

This didn’t stop the media from dragging me into his “fab” world. I hadn’t worked a day in my life, yet articles began to appear with titles like “Meet Stefan’s Cool Kid Sister!” with pictures of me modeling the latest in cool children’s wear. I even technically have a song-writing credit. My brother and I wrote a song called “Otis the Sheep.” It was sort of an homage to the Lewis Carroll nonsense poem “Jabberwocky” with lots of “cool”-sounding, made-up words. It was perfectly stupid, but by God, they printed it, “lyrics by Stefan and Alison Arngrim.” I was famous, and I hadn’t done a damn thing.

One day, a fanzine came over to interview the family (“Meet Stefan’s Groovy Family!” “See Stefan’s Groovy Dog!”). The woman who interviewed us was very nice; she even stayed for lunch. Back then, we had the great status symbol of a maid. She was primarily for symbolic effect, since with my neat-freak father around, there just wasn’t that much left to clean. My brother and I must have been unusually well behaved that day, because the maid had baked us a lemon meringue pie. It was fantastic, and of course we served it to the lady from the magazine.

When the article came out, I was stunned. Not one single word anyone actually said all day was in there. There were lots of other words, all very nice, but all completely made up. I was only six, but I had *been* at the lunch table. These people in the article didn’t even talk like anyone in my house! They were total strangers! And to top it all off, it included the ridiculous claim that my mother had made the lemon meringue pie. Bewildered, I asked my father, “Why? I don’t understand—we were all there—why not write down what we said? And Mom *bake a pie*? Everyone knows Mom can’t cook!”

And that’s when I learned one of the most important lessons of my life—at age five. “That’s what they do in magazines,” explained my father patiently, “they make things up. No one cares if it’s true. So they write whatever they think will make a better story.” This blew my mind at the time, but I’m so glad I learned this warped lesson then, long before I was ever on TV and had to deal with the *National Enquirer* and *TV Guide*. It’s good to have your expectations lowered as much as possible before you go into show business.

We Arngrims arrived in Hollywood just in time for the riots. In the summer of 1966, there was a teeny little rock club on Sunset called Pandora’s Box. Well, not really on Sunset, but on what was actually a traffic island in the middle of the street. It was that teeny. And apparently it was ground zero for the entire L.A. hippie population. As a kid, I was fascinated with it, since it was painted purple and looked like some kind of kid’s playhouse, just sitting there in the middle of the street. I couldn’t understand why I wasn’t allowed to go in. Turns out a lot of people didn’t want their kids going in, and the police shut it down one night, resulting in a series of demonstrations and riots, so huge, that they became the basis of the Buffalo Springfield song “For What It’s Worth.” You know, “It’s time we stop, hey, what’s that sound? / Everybody look what’s going down.” Yeah, that one. There really were “a thousand people in the street.” Probably quite a bit more than that, actually. At one point, the rioters even turned over a bus.

We were living up on the fifth floor of the Chateau, giving us the best view of the scene. My parents and their friends gathered on the balconies to drink wine and watch the spectacle. I wasn’t

allowed out on the balconies, so I felt quite put out. My mother explained to me that it wasn't so because there might be something called "tear gas." I remember hearing the adults talk and asking my mother, "What's a riot?" The explanation I was given about people fighting in groups, etc., didn't make a lot of sense, and I became convinced it was some kind of sporting event. I had visions of organized teams in something like karate robes with wooden poles taking turns hitting one another. It's not surprising I thought it was all a game from the reaction of the grown-ups on the balcony. They were yelling and laughing: "The peasants are revolting!" "Let them eat cake!"

But riots weren't the only thing I could see from our perch in the castle. From my bathroom window, I had a perfect view of a revolving billboard. No, not just any revolving billboard, but a giant Bullwinkle. For also on Sunset were the offices of Jay Ward, the creator of Rocky and Bullwinkle. At the corner of Sunset and Marmont Lane, he had erected a perfect replica of Bullwinkle J. Moose, in a glittering, cut-away showgirl costume, with Rocket J. Squirrel perched on his outstretched hand. Every time I went to the bathroom, I watched Bullwinkle go round and round and round. I thought he had been put there just for me.

Back then, children were permitted to play in the halls at the Chateau. But they weren't the only ones roaming aimlessly. Some of the more stoned or spaced out adults could also be found wandering about. One day, I found an old woman in my hallway. She was very well dressed and had an accent. She sounded British, like the people in that annoying *Mary Poppins* movie. She had a wonderful smile and seemed sort of funny and dotty. As if I had found a stray kitten, I brought her home to my mother and asked if I could keep her.

She turned out to be the famous music-hall star and actress Beatrice Lillie. No, I couldn't keep her, as she really did have her own apartment down the hall, but she did officially become my new best friend. I made it clear that she was specifically *my* friend, and my parents were allowed to play with her only when I was busy.

We all went to see her in her movie when it opened: *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, with Julie Andrews, Carol Channing, and Mary Tyler Moore. Bea played Mrs. Meers, the scary old lady with the chopsticks in her hair who kidnaps the girls in the movie by chloroforming them and dumping them into a large wicker basket. I absolutely loved her. She was the villain.

Bea was delighted to come to my big event as well—my fifth birthday party, held in our apartment in the Castle. She brought me a present. It was in a big box with lots of tissue paper. When I got it open, I pulled out a ceramic sculpture—of what appeared to be a disembodied head. The grown-ups all stared at Bea in horror. She said simply, "Oh, I just never know what to get for children."

I thought it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. It was a sculpture of what looked like a beautiful dark-eyed East Indian boy. I eventually named it Mowgli, after *The Jungle Book* character and kept it on my dresser and stored hats on it. I still consider it one of the top-ten best gifts I've ever received.

I liked surprises, and my childhood was full of them. I never knew who in the way of friends my parents were going to spring on me next. Some of my parents' pals were more fun than others, some were just barely tolerated, but I couldn't say any of them were boring. One of my favorite grown-ups was named Christine, whom I befriended when I was about seven. She was an older lady, but I liked her because she didn't talk to me like I was stupid. Because I was so small for my age, a lot of adults treated me as if I were younger than I was. But Christine wasn't one of those. She would look me in the eye and listen to what I was saying. She would ask me sensible questions and pay attention to the answers. If I asked her a question, she didn't laugh and say, "Oh, how cute!" She just answered it like a regular person. In other words, she was capable of holding a normal, intelligent conversation.

She met my mother through their shared publicist. My mother was at the height of her *Caspar* and *Gumby* fame, and Christine had a book that she discussed on the lecture circuit and in a nightclub act. She, like my mother, had become quite famous in the late '50s and early '60s. Her name was Christine Jorgensen—the recipient of the world's first “publicly acknowledged” sex-change operation.

She had at one time been a soldier named George Jorgensen, who one day realized that certain *things* were just not what they should be. So he went on a quest for medical assistance with what at that time was thought to be a rare condition. He found his way to the doctors in Denmark who were pioneering this new treatment, and several very experimental surgeries later, *she* returned to America to live out her new life as a woman, in peace and total anonymity.

Except it didn't quite work out that way. The press found out, and the 1950s equivalent of today's rabid paparazzi met her at the airport, where all hell broke loose. The headlines read: “Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty!” and “Operations Transform Bronx Youth!”

I didn't have a clue about Christine's past, but then one day, my parents came to me and said, “We need to talk to you about Auntie Christine.” I was worried and thought maybe she'd been in an accident or something.

“It's just that Auntie Christine is famous, and, well, you might hear about this on the news,” my mother said delicately. (I was surprisingly up on current events for the average second grader. A major news junkie, I never missed Walter Cronkite.)

My parents seemed to be hemming and hawing, which was unusual. Finally, they said, “Auntie Christine used to be a man.”

“What?” I said and stared at them. I knew they were nuts, but I thought maybe this time they had finally gone the rest of the way around the bend.

“She used to be a man,” they replied nervously. “She's a woman now, of course. Uh...you see, she was born a man, and, well, she had an operation...” The whole explanation tumbled out quickly.

“Oh.” I mean really, what can you say to a story like that? But then my curiosity was piqued. “So wait, you mean people can change? Men can become women, and women can become men?”

They looked even more nervous. “Uh...well, yes. But it's very complicated.”

“So then, if I wanted to, *I could become a guy?*”

The furious backpedaling began: “Oh, well, technically, yes. Of course, you'd have to be an adult, and, of course, it's a major medical procedure; several operations, you know, very expensive.”

I was ecstatic. “Wow! That is so cool!”

I hardly think that was the response they expected, but it was cool. This strange thing they were describing with such discomfort was nothing short of a miracle. I knew I was living in what was quickly becoming an age of scientific wonder; I had just recently seen men walk on the surface of the moon, right there on TV in my own living room. And now they were telling me of yet another astounding scientific triumph. This was cause for celebration!

Of course, I didn't really grasp the implications of Christine's sex change. I also wasn't clear about whether or not one could have multiple operations and just go back and forth, from gender to gender, as one needed. I thought that a person could then, by logical extension, have surgery to become *anything*: a monkey, a giraffe...a fire engine. But what I did get was the underlying principle: a person was no longer permanently defined by the circumstances of his or her birth. Biology was no longer destiny. I had no real desire to become male at that time, and so far, the female thing has really worked out for me. But all my life, I have known, deep in my heart, that if it didn't, I knew my options. Because of this realization, I feel that I am, and have always been, a woman by choice.

As fabulous as this news was, I had no idea what I was supposed to do the next time I saw

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