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Painted Faces and Picket Fences

One Woman's Confrontation with Her Role in Society in Post-World War II America

Jillian Mullen
Honors Project
Spring 2006

Painted Faces and Picket Fences: One Woman's Confrontation with Her Role in Society in Post-World War II America

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To counteract the potential harm vulnerable young men and women faced in a new age of postwar economic and social uncertainties, couples turned to the suburbs in unprecedented numbers as a place to raise their children in a safe and secure environment in the 1950s. Many turned to the home as an escape: a world in which they could live unaffected by the threat of nuclear war, radical politics (i.e. Communism) and more liberal definitions of female sexuality. Family was, in their minds, the one thing all Americans could rely on to be a guaranteed presence in their everyday lives. In the formation of this stable home environment, however, suburban wives and mothers were forced into roles as homemakers and family caretakers. They were supposed to see themselves as living the ideal life and feel rewarded by the benefits of consumerism and having children. Unfortunately, these women did not anticipate that their purpose in the suburban dream would lead to feelings of disillusionment and general frustration that their lives had not evolved into what they had anticipated.

These images of suburban domesticity rooted in fantasy provide the background for young, married women coming to the realization that their inner desires had no place in this vision. The purpose behind my honors project was to delve into the deterioration of this ideal through the eyes of the women who were subjected to its social restrictions. I have written a fictional narrative using the short story medium as an attempt to personalize the reality of these women's daily existence. The main character is Patty Harris, a typical housewife who finds herself living in the suburbs and taking on the role of wife and mother by age twenty-one. Her initial insecurities are suppressed by the excitement of a baby on the way and she takes comfort in the fact that her closest friends are involved in similar situations and are experiencing it simultaneously with her. As Patty becomes settled in her new marriage and home, however, she begins to feel the internal and external pressures of living up to the standards of the community. Desperately trying to salvage her faith in her domestic role, Patty wrestles with her love for her family and her growing resentment of ignoring her own needs at the expense of her husband and children's reliance upon her.

This story is a creative interpretation of a fascinating period in women's history in the United States. It is amazing to think that so many Americans bought into the mass movement into the suburbs not only because of post-World War II prosperity but also because of shifting ideas of class. I wanted my narrative to be more than just a unique retelling of the past. The extent to which today's wives and mothers are still faced with the decision of choosing a career versus fulfilling traditional maternal roles is still very relevant. It's something almost every woman addresses at some point in her life. I hope that my story offers a window into the past and encourages the reader to think about how women's place in society has changed in the last fifty years.

I

> Five years after a world war has been won, men's hearts should anticipate a long peace, and men's minds should be free from the heavy weight that comes with war. But this is not such a period -- for this is not a period of peace. This is a time of the Cold War. This is a time when the entire world is split into two vast, increasingly hostile armed camps -- a time of a great armaments race. Today we can almost physically hear the mutterings and rumblings of an invigorated god of war…The reason why we find ourselves in a position of impotency is not because our only powerful, potential enemy has sent men to invade our shores, but rather because of the traitorous actions of those who have been treated so well by this nation. It has not been the less fortunate or members of minority groups who have been selling this nation out, but rather those who have had all the benefits that the wealthiest nation on earth has had to offer -- the finest homes, the finest college education, and the finest jobs in government we can give.[1] – Senator Joseph McCarthy, February 1950

Fear is defined by our own needs, values and concerns. The words and actions that trigger panic in response to some leave others unfazed or indifferent in the same situation. For me, when I first heard Joseph McCarthy's words uttered over a radio broadcast in that spring of 1950, whatever total faith I placed in the protection my family, friends and home provided me, my personal foundation experienced its first crack. I'm not one to fabricate my feelings and ideas, so when I tell you that my initial response to McCarthy's words was unnerving more than anything else, I think I speak for more than a few American housewives who heard those very same words. Yet like most other Americans, I swallowed that rhetoric given to me by the outlandish Senator from Wisconsin, and let it sink in, knowing that I was considered helpless to do anything about it. More so, I naively hoped that any facet of this Communist hunt would stay out of my home and my everyday life. I soon found out that I was powerless on both accounts, in almost every component of my life.

My fears were different from that of my son. I know that the things I was most afraid of my husband did not entirely share with me. My son Daniel was only two years old at the time. I

[1] http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/episodes/06/documents/mccarthy/

could not ignore the face that he was still so innocent and could not even begin to comprehend the implications of Senator McCarthy's speech. I was almost envious of my little boy that these words could not be chilling to him, that he could not see the potential for McCarthy and his cronies to violate the most basic of our constitutional rights. My son merely took it all in as a voice on the radio and nothing more. I felt a natural urge to protect my son but whatever fears that compelled me to shelter Danny did not register with him. Maybe I was trying to protect him because he could not understand that communist and socialist fears would likely not be restricted to only scrutiny of government officials. It would not be until a few years later that I thought maybe I was trying to protect him because that's what was expected of me. I was a wife and mother—of course I was going to be concerned with the wellbeing of my husband and my little boy. Only years later would I question why I tried so hard to shelter my family from the uncertainty that accompanied the Cold War era when I was powerless to change much in the suburban community I was part of.

As I came to realize as the decade progressed and I became better acclimated with my role in my family that I had been partially responsible for creating, a new fear began to surface. I had expected my two old son to be immune to the terror of Joseph McCarthy's witch hunt but I did not expect the same of my family and female friends. It was mind-blowing to me that such an infringement on freedom of speech and association did not sound an alarm in the minds of my adult friends any more than it did in my son. How could it be that I was the only person that thought maybe the perfect world in the suburbs could not keep out the issues of the real world that every American faced no matter where they lived? I did not conceive the full scope of my question until the decade was coming to a close. I remember McCarthy's speech as the first moment when this fear of standing out by American social standards that consumed so many

people began to register in my mind as parallel to my own strides to conform to society's definition of a middle-class housewife. My life was becoming something that everyone but myself could control and whatever power I did maintain I rarely used for my own personal benefit. American society and culture told me what would give me the greatest satisfaction. I did feel a sense of fulfillment from some of these cultural prescriptions so to speak but I could not help but feeling boxed in, like what I would personally value I had to be instructed upon. It would be a struggle for me to balance my own anxieties about my role as a wife and mother—what I knew deep down I should do and what I was told I should do.

II

"Bobby proposed!" Margie blurted out to me that clear blue day back in June 1946.

The excited look on her face seemed appropriate, the cloudless sky giving way to the warmth of the sun on my back. We had just graduated from high school a couple of weeks ago and the excitement of our lives ahead carried over into Margie's enthusiasm while we sat together on the sea wall, looking out at the beach that would be full of swimmers and sun bathers in the coming weeks.

"Oh, it was so romantic, Patty! I didn't know my Bobby had it in him. Well I knew he would propose to me sooner or later but he sure pulled a fast one on me last week!"

"How did he ask you Margie?" I responded knowing full well that my best friend didn't need to be prompted to go on with her story.

"Well, he took me over to the marina for dinner, you know that little Italian place we love over on the boardwalk? It was just delicious. It was funny though, Bobby didn't get his usual, but I didn't think much of it after he ordered. I couldn't decide if I wanted chicken or veal. I thought to myself I just had spaghetti the other day at my house but I was in the mood for it still--"

"--Marg, sweetie," I interrupted, "if you keep on like this we'll be here all night!"

"I'm so sorry Patty, I just can't contain myself. And I don't' want to leave anything out! Anyway, after we finished eating we decided to walk along the boardwalk and watch the sun set from that adorable little gazebo. Next thing you know, I turn around and there's my Bobby, kneeling at my feet and proposing to me with a beautiful diamond ring in his hand!"

"What did you tell him? The rock on that band would have to be a darn sight bigger in order to win you over?" I sweetly joked.

Margie let out a healthy laugh. "Awe no, it was everything I could have hoped for. And of course, I said yes! We want the wedding to be at the end of August."

Bob and Margaret had only been dating for a little less than a year. I was a little surprised to hear that Bobby had proposed so soon but I was sure to not let my slight astonishment show in my face when Margie told me the news. No one else, including Margie, seemed the least bit shocked at this chain of events, so of course, as her best friend, I didn't want to be the one to say anything that might burst her bubble.

Margie and I had been best friends since our early days back at Hillview Elementary. We grew up in a fast-growing town along the water in Massachusetts, and our younger days were filled with trips to the beach and boat rides. The sea wall down the street from my house was our place we would go to share our most secret thoughts and feelings. Even though we were rarely allowed to be on our own down by the water, it was somewhere we felt no one could touch, where no other people but the two of us could understand its simplicity. It seemed like we had talked with each other about what boys we thought we cute just the other day and now, here we were with our discussion about boys reaching far beyond cuteness. My best friend of more than ten years would soon have a husband.

Bobby Richards was the prototype for the all-American boy. He was good looking, a star football player and an academic standout at Riverdale High School—and more importantly, the biggest heartthrob for every girl at school. I'll admit that I even had a crush on him until he started going steady with Margie. He appeared to be everything both my parents and I would want in a boyfriend. It was almost as if I would be looked at in dismay by my friends if I didn't admire Bobby in one form or another as he *was* the school's biggest catch. Margie always thought so and sure enough, she was the one to grab hold of him.

If there was one thing about Margie that you remembered, it was that when she set out to do something, she made damn sure that she got what she was looking for. In a way, I almost lived vicariously through her. Like Margie, I had a number of good friends and was well-rounded in high school, but I never had that natural ability to capture people's attention wherever I went or at least be totally confident when it came to approaching people. She wasn't even the most attractive or the smartest girl at our school but she had no qualms about going after what she wanted.

I was a little jealous of Margie at first, seeing as how she probably wouldn't be around to spend as much time with me and started dating the guy every girl in school wanted. Eventually I started getting the occasional question from my mom about whether I had met any boys at school. If it were up to my dad, he would have had me single for life. No guy would be good enough for me. But the reality was that here I was at seventeen years old and with no boyfriend to date.

A few months went by and once in a while a guy at school would catch my interest but I wouldn't think to do much about it. Then my friend Mary started seeing this boy from our history class and there went another friend to blissful couple status. I tried to not let the fact that

I was unattached bother me, but it seemed to confront me at school, at home and when I went out with my friends. I was only seventeen! I had my whole life ahead of me to find my dream guy and after three and a half years of high school, I felt pretty confident that he wasn't lurking in the hallways at Riverdale. But everyone around me tried to convince me otherwise.

Fortunately, I didn't have to deal with all that pressure for too much longer. If Margie hadn't started going out with Bobby, I never would have met Steve. Steve was a friend of Bobby's who lived a couple of towns over and had been Bob's next door neighbor growing up. One Saturday night Margie called me up and convinced me to come out to the movies with her, Bobby and Bobby's friend Steve who, according to Margie's words "didn't want to be third wheel and had nothing better to do." It wasn't exactly the most enticing proposition, but seeing as how Marg and I hadn't hung out together for a couple of weekends, I obliged the three of them. I never could have guessed that one decision would affect the rest of my life.

III

Steve Harris was one of those guys that never stood out as the most handsome, most athletic or the funniest but had a certain charm to him that made him irresistible. I didn't notice it right away when he introduced himself to me at the movie theatre but he exuded this warmth, even though he had just met me, and broke through my shy outer shell in no time. All the while we were talking, the last thing I wanted to do was compare him to Bobby, Mister "I-have-it-all." But Steve was such a nice guy and seemed so interested in finding out about who I was I didn't even think about Bob and Margie's relationship that much.

"You know this movie kind of kills the mood," Steve said halfway through our dramatic thriller of a romance movie.

"What are you talking about?" I said. "I think the movie is pretty exciting. Plus the two main characters are in love. How can you say it's killing the mood?"

"Well, how can I create the mood when I've got this movie goin' on in the background?"

Even though I was a little taken aback by him making a move on me so soon, I couldn't help but be won over by his witty remarks. He got me to laugh and lose my nervousness the way no other guy I had ever met could. He probably bothered all the other movie goers talking throughout the whole film but I didn't care. This night was chalking up to be the most fun I'd had in weeks. So what if he was just your average guy? I felt comfortable around him and I thought for sure this one deserved a chance with me.

After the movie let out, Bobby suggested we go to the late night diner down on the corner of Martin Street. Jimmy's Burgers was a favorite hang out for all the local kids so it seemed an ideal place for us to hang out and give me a chance to get to know Steve a little better. The four of us sat down, ordered milkshakes and told some crazy stories from our years in school. Margie began to feel tired and wanted to leave with Bobby, but Steve had brought his car so he offered to give me a ride home.

When we pulled up to my house, Steve turned to me and said, "You know, you're not like most other girls I've met. Most girls think I'm too forward sometimes."

"I thought you were quite a gentleman actually," I replied coyly. "Usually, the guy tries to make a move at the movies right away. You wanted to make sure I had my funny bone intact first."

"I'd sure like to see you again. Maybe now that we know each other better I can sit through a movie with you. I promise I'll be on my best behavior!"

I gave him a sly grin and said, "Well, why don't you give me a call next Friday and let's see if you keep that promise."

Just then, he looked right into my eyes and said, "You know, you've got the cutest smile. I've wanted to say that to you all night but I didn't want it to come off as a bad attempt to pick you up." Then, he moved his neck ever so slightly, and grabbing my chin his lips brushed my cheek. No guy had ever been so sweet to me on first meeting me. I couldn't help but be drawn in by his charisma and his fearless attempts to win a second date with me.

I reached for the door handle. "Pick me up at six."

IV

Steve and I hit it off just as well on our second date, this time going to see a horror movie. And Steve kept his promise, only to talk twice as much as usual once we left the theatre. Going out on Friday nights soon became a ritual for us and after a couple of months, it was official: we were going steady. Margie was thrilled, of course; she had been the one to set us up and now her best friend was dating her boyfriend's friend. The situation couldn't have worked out better. I was just excited that I finally had a guy in my life! No longer was the only girl without a boyfriend in my group of friends. Just three months ago I had thought to myself: so what if I don't have a boyfriend? I'm still really young and someone will come my way eventually. Now the tables had turned: I found that my new relationship was the biggest priority in my life. The little time that Margie and I spent together—just the two of us--when she was dating Bobby and I was single became practically non-existent when I began going out with Steve.

It certainly bothered me that our friendship might deteriorate but I was so thrilled about my situation with Steve that he consumed all of my free time. Steve worked part-time as a caddy at the local golf course, so every Saturday and Sunday during the day he was busy. But we had weekend nights to be together, whether it was with Bobby and Margie or just the two of us. The pattern repeated itself every weekend right up until graduation.

Then, only a couple of weeks after our life in high school ended, Margie told me Bobby popped the question. All of a sudden, life wasn't going to be so consistent anymore; marrying Bobby would be a huge change for Margie and meant yet another change in my relationship with my best friend. Sometimes I wondered if I had already lost her. Everything and anything she ever told me in those days was related to her relationship with Bobby. I couldn't help but wonder where all those wild schemes and ideas Marg had when we were little girls went. If any of them were still floating somewhere in her mind, she had adjusted them for Bobby. When she told me that gorgeous June day back in 1946 that her and Bob were engaged, the whole story seemed to be about him. His parents had offered to put a down-payment on a house for them in our town while Bobby took night classes at a college in Boston. During the day, he was going to work with his dad at the advertising agency Mr. Richards had been with for thirty years. Naturally, I was happy for Bob that he had all these great opportunities waiting for him in the coming months, but everything Margie said was either in terms of Bob or "them."

Finally, I practically blurted out to her: "Well, what about you, Marg? I'm thrilled for the both of you that all of this is happening but how is this going to affect you yourself?"

"Well, I'm sure that it's going to be an adjustment living without my parents!" She stifled a laugh, "Even though I'm not even moving out of town!" "But I'm sure I'll have to pick out the furniture, get used to being Mrs. Richards--"

"I don't think you understand what I'm trying to say, Margie," I said as politely as possible. "What going to happen in *your* life now, besides all that?"

"Well, I hadn't really thought of that. You know, I've just been on cloud nine since Bobby proposed. What I'm going to do really hasn't come up, lately all the talk has been about Bobby. I'm sure that for the time being I'll be getting ready to be Mrs. Richards!"

Walking back to my house with Margie, I kept chewing Margie's words over and over in my mind. How could she not be thinking about her future and what she was going to be doing while Bobby was working and taking college courses? Certainly being "Mrs. Richards" wasn't an occupation, was it? And how could Bobby not had that discussion with her? This was his soon-to-be wife! Maybe they had talked about Margie's role in their new life and she just had decided not to mention it to me. Not only did her marriage to Bobby have implications for our friendship, but it also made me question my romance with Steve. I had been dating Steve for about five months and the thought hadn't even occurred to me when he would ask me to marry him. Sure, he showered me with compliments all the time and clearly, in my opinion at least, was lovingly committed to me if his actions were any indication. So he never told me "I love you Patty"; it was just sort of implied. And yet, here I was wondering if this great guy who had been in my life for five months might soon ask me to be something more.

Margie's wedding to Bob was one of the biggest events for the whole town in the summer of '46. Of course, it was to be lavish and the reception was to be held at the most upscale country club on the South Shore of Massachusetts. The Richards family oozed wealth and upper-class smarminess. Bobby himself was never one to make a big deal out of his privileged disposition but his parents made sure that Bobby—and the rest of the community—never forgot it. Margie's family, on the other hand, was fairly well-to-do but their middle-class status was by community standards lower than that of the Richards. Bobby and Margie's wedding was going to be far from a small gathering, so Margie and her family were slightly bothered by the fact that the Richards and their money were going to be the focal point of the wedding. My whole town was buzzing about the wedding, so it didn't come as a huge surprise to me that Margie was entirely preoccupied by preparing for it. I barely ever saw her in the weeks leading up to her wedding,

and even if I did, I was helping her with wedding planning, not spending time with her doing things for *our* friendship. I really started to miss our talks on the sea wall, so I started bringing Steve there with me. To my delight, Steve loved just sitting and looking out into the ocean with me. It started to become an almost nightly event.

One steamy night in late July, Steve and I walked down to the beach after getting ice cream. We sat down, our legs dangling over the edge while we watched the moonlight reflect off of the unusually quiet sea. He took my hand in his, and said softly, "You know, babe, this wedding for Bob and Marg next month, it's going to be one heck of an event."

I nodded my head and murmured, "Yea, I know." All I ever heard about from my family and friends was Margie's wedding. I was getting tired of hearing about it and now Steve? Enough was enough! Margie was my best friend but there was more going on in my life then getting ready for her wedding.

Steve turned to me, with a look on his face I hadn't ever seen before. "You know, you deserve a wedding just as nice as Margie's. I know you'd be the prettiest girl I'd ever seen in a white dress."

I was speechless. Was Steve really imagining me at my own wedding? I was at a total loss for words, so I replied to him, in that sarcastic tone he loved to use, "Well, I'd like to think that I'd steal the show at my own wedding."

"I know you would. You'd be the envy of every girl there." Suddenly, Steve jumped off the wall and got down on one knee. "That's why I want to be the guy that has that girl, babe. Patty, will you marry me?"

My mouth slightly open in surprise, with my lips spreading into a smile, I said yes. My gut reaction was to agree to marry him, but, days later, I remained awestruck that I had just had my

boyfriend of a little more than five months propose to me. My life was already in a whirlwind as it was with Margie's upcoming marriage; now I had to start planning my own! Inside part of me felt that I was still only eighteen years old and I hadn't even known Steve for that long. Did we know each other well enough to commit to each other in matrimony? All I knew was that I liked him well enough to be dating him. Yet, I couldn't ignore the fact that marrying Steve just felt right. Margie was only a couple of months older than me and here she was marrying her boyfriend. My best friend, the one who always knew what she wanted in life, was getting what she wanted in being Mrs. Bob Richards. Mentally, I could envision myself as Mrs. Steve Harris. I had never met a guy like him and I was convinced that whenever I did get married, I would want my husband to resemble Steve in one form or another. What really won me over was the way he treated me the first night I had met him. Five months later, he treated me the same as he did from that first night. Steve was smart and his family was upper-middle class. His parents were friendly people who always made me feel at home in their house. More importantly, my family loved Steve. Getting my dad's permission would be tough, but Steve had this uncanny ability to joke with my dad the way no other guy my age had been able to. Steve would make a great husband in so many ways. I decided I was ready to become Patty Harris.

V

Steve and I set our wedding for mid-October. Now that I, too, was engaged, Margie and Bob's wedding became a less intense situation for me. I could focus on getting ready for my own marriage ceremony and just being happy for my best friend. August came and Margie's wedding was just as elaborate an affair as I (as well as the whole town!) expected. It was really more of a chance for the Richards to show off their wealth to everyone, what with the plethora of rich entrees and indulgent desserts, not to mention the lavish decorations. Clearly, no one spared any

expense at the ceremony. I knew my wedding wouldn't quite be on par with Margie's but I didn't care too much. I chose to focus on the fact that I was marrying a wonderful man who could provide for me. Marg and Bob honeymooned at a resort in Florida and within two weeks of returning to start their life in their new home, Margie called me up on the phone to tell me she was pregnant. I could hardly believe what I was hearing. September had come and her life was even more of a whirlwind than it was when she was preparing for her wedding.

"Did you tell Bob yet?" I inquired.

"Oh, Bobby is just as excited. He's already told me he hopes it's a boy so he can name him Bob the Third!" Margie gushed.

"How about your parents and Bob's parents?" I replied. "I know my Steve will be thrilled to hear the good news for you both."

"I called them up right after I called Bob at work. They were both so excited about the prospect of having a grandson!'

I was a little puzzled by her referring to her unborn child as male already. "Margie, you don't even know if it's a boy yet."

"I know, Patty, I know. Just the thought of raising the spitting image of my Bobby and another Richards to go into the family business someday is so exciting."

While Margie became obsessed with motherhood and making a home for her new family, my wedding was fast approaching and despite all my excitement, I couldn't help but be a little anxious about it. I was still so young and Steve himself was only older than me by six months. What if my life in the next few months didn't fall into place like Margie's? I just hoped that my marriage to Steve would start out on the right foot.

I got my wish. Our wedding was on a beautiful autumn day in October, with the vibrant colors of the leaves traditional of fall in New England painting a picture-perfect backdrop for our day. We had our reception at the yacht club near my beloved sea wall, where I used to stare out at the ocean in my youth. I had a lovely honeymoon with Steve in California that had every bit of romance, if not more, of the days we spent dating each other. A few weeks before the ceremony, we had found a cute ranch-style house on the outskirts of town that seemed ideal for our first home together. Soon after coming back from our honeymoon, we put a down-payment on it and bought the house. We had been truly fortunate to have Bob offer Steve an excellent job at the advertising agency where he and his dad worked. It would be a position below Bob but it still was an opportunity he couldn't refuse. Steve was a little apprehensive about it, what with Bob being his cousin and getting a lower-paying position than him.

"I'm just as equally qualified as Bob, you know, Patty. I appreciate the job offer, I just don't know if I can work under him and Rob Sr."

"But Steve," I said, "This is a great chance for you to get your foot in the door at the company. You know you will be bringing home a good salary anyway. You are so smart, honey, this is the right thing to do."

"Fine, I'll take the job. But I want you to know, babe, I'm doing this for you. For our future family." His eyes told me he meant it. And I believed he had my well-being as the main priority in all his decisions. Steve never wavered from his feelings about me as his wife; it was just that years later, I found him to express them sometimes in a different fashion.

VI

We moved into our new house on Cottage Street by the end of November 1946. Steve was almost a month into his job at the ad firm but he wasn't really enjoying it that much. Bob, one of

his best friends supposedly, treated Steve like he was below him at work and always made sure everyone knew that his dad was in a position at the top of the firm. Steve wanted to talk to him about treating him better, as a co-worker and friend, especially since Bob Sr. was the one who got him the job, but the fact that Bobby got Steve the job in the first place kept him from doing so. I thought about approaching Margie to see if she could talk to Bobby about it, but it seemed to me her words probably wouldn't change how Bob treated Steve. While Steve tried to get himself settled at work, I spent some of my time during the day visiting with my parents or Margie, but I spent most of my time working with tasks around the house. I put a lot of effort into furnishing the house, sewing blankets, putting up picture frames, monitoring the contractors we hired to paint our bedroom and wallpaper the dining room. Even though I wasn't working a nine-to-five job, most everything I did was time-consuming. I even picked up cooking and experimented with new recipes so that Steve, after a frustrating day at work, would have something nice to come home to.

As progress on the house moved along, though, I started to become restless with the increasing amounts of free time that I had. I decided that I might try and get a part-time job as a piano teacher. I had taken lessons as a young girl and never lost my love of piano-playing. I approached Steve one night about my idea, and he seemed pretty supportive of the notion.

"Well as long as you aren't working full-time, babe. We still have a ways to go on this house you know."

"It'll be just a small job, honey. It will give us a little extra cash. Maybe we could buy a piano, or even take my parent's old one. I might have to work outside of the house sometimes, but it's something I really want to do."

"Speaking of buying new things, I want to get you this new oven I saw advertised in the paper I was reading today. It supposed to be the best one on the market and you'll love it since you've been doing all this cooking lately. Babe, these mashed potatoes are delicious, by the way."

"Steve, sweetheart, what does a new oven have to do with me giving piano lessons? I want to know what you think." It really shouldn't have been something I had to ask his permission for. I knew I wanted to try being piano teacher, maybe give me a greater sense of accomplishment knowing I was teaching people my skill. Plus, I needed to take my mind off all of our household projects for a change. Yet I felt like I couldn't go through with my plan unless Steve told me he thought it was a good idea.

"Well, Patty, if it really means that much to you, then go ahead. Just keep an eye on those contractors and tell them we need them for a few more days. I think I want them to re-wallpaper the downstairs bathroom too."

So I started spreading word around town that I was available for piano lessons. Steve bought me a nice piano that happened to be used but was a finely tuned as a brand new one. Business was pretty slow at first, as I expected, but gradually my clientele expanded to included young children in the neighborhood whose parents thought it would be a good hobby for them to pursue. Sometimes, while I sat on the piano bench next to them, it hit me that I really wasn't that much older than these children I was instructing. Yet my best friend Margie, nineteen years old, was due with her first child in less than five months. I started wondering when I might start having children.

By March, Steve and I were pretty well-settled in our pattern and our house was nearly finished with its renovations. Work was going better for Steve, having gotten a small promotion and I was really enjoying my job as a piano instructor. My parents were glad to see the two of us so

happy but Steve's parents, for some reason, weren't very enthusiastic about me turning my hobby into a part-time job. Even though I took a great deal of personal pleasure from it, it did bring in some extra income for us. It bothered me that my new in-laws felt this way, but Steve told me not to worry too much about it. Apparently, they felt that I should be spending more time at home, focusing on making the house a more comfortable place to live for the both of us and working on my "wifely skills." Steve, they thought, would be bringing in more than enough money for us to live on so my having a job was unnecessary. I was hurt by this, because teaching piano lessons was something I wanted to do for myself. I always thought that in a relationship you still were able to serve your needs and desires, regardless of what stage you were at. It seemed Mr. and Mrs. Harris felt otherwise. I found out in April of '47 that my job as a piano instructor wouldn't be such an issue for much longer. It turned out that I was pregnant with my first child.

VII

Steve and I knew that we wanted to have kids someday. It was just that in the whirlwind of a few months that we had been a married couple, we hadn't had much time to talk about planning when to have our first child. And yet here I was, in a situation five years ago I would not have seen myself being in. Before I was twenty years old, I was married and pregnant, living in my very own home. I did have some consolation to my anxieties about the responsibilities that came with my new life. For one thing, I was still living in the same town I grew up in, with my parents living twenty minutes away. But more importantly, my best friend Margie was experiencing many of these changes simultaneously with me. If I was nervous or I felt I needed help handling a difficult situation, I knew I could rely on her to be there for me. Even still, Margie was so preoccupied with her new life and the baby on the way that the time we spent

with each other paled in comparison to just two years earlier. Our lives had completely changed in such a short span of time. It was not as if we weren't happy with the positions we found ourselves in; it was just that from my point of view at least, it was pretty much unexpected. I hadn't really started preparing myself for the role of wife and mother until Margie told me that Bob had proposed to her. It was only then that I thought I might need to anticipate my future with Steve as part of it.

When I told Steve I was pregnant with our first child, he was ecstatic. He had finally started to feel comfortable at the advertising agency and thought that in the coming months, there was no better time for us to start our family. I hadn't thought we would start our family so quickly, especially just as I was starting to establish myself as a very good piano instructor. Now I was faced with the prospect of having to quit my part-time job much sooner than I wanted to. Teaching a two-hour lesson three or four times a week broke up the day for me, and was something I really looked forward to. I approached Steve on whether I might be able to keep giving piano lessons once the baby, due in January, was born.

"Well, I don't know, babe. Gonna be kind of crazy for a while with a newborn baby to take care of. You're gonna be so busy."

"You mean *we're* gonna be busy." I shot back.

"Yes, us. You know what I meant. Anyway, it's gonna take a lot out of us so it's hard to say now whether you'll be able to keep doing that."

This was not the answer I was looking for. But I took it at the time. Later on, after the baby needed a little less attention, I was convinced I would be able to keep giving piano lessons. Meanwhile, as my belly began to expand, I kept giving lessons. Margie had her baby at the end of June. Just as she and Bobby (not to mention her in-laws) wanted, they had a little baby boy

whom they not surprisingly named Robert Richards, III. Steve and I went over to their house a few days after Margie came home from the hospital. They already had a baby room furnished with every amenity and toy you could imagine. Little Bobby was going to grow up with a silver spoon in his mouth. I found myself comparing my situation to Margie's once again. It was hard not to, since she seemed to be going through all the motions just a few months ahead of me on every big event I experienced. Now I got to see her take care of her newborn before my firstborn was due. I had to keep reminding myself, though, that my life was not a carbon copy of Margie's. Margie had married into a wealthier family, so anything she wanted to beautify or renovate their home she could have. But I felt I had an upper hand on my best friend because I had been holding a small job for the past few months. All of Margie's free time went to Bobby, her family and in-laws, taking care of the house and now her little boy. I still had the opportunity to do something for me.

As my due date approached, the remaining few weeks I had left became incredibly uncomfortable. Having a child was going to be thrilling but I couldn't wait to have the baby already—what a long nine months! I had to stop giving piano lessons because I couldn't sit on a piano bench for two hours, which saddened me, but I knew it was only temporary. I gave birth to eight pound, one ounce Daniel John on January 17, 1948. He was absolutely adorable; he had my blue eyes and his father's nose. We took him home the next day and with both our families gathered and our closest friends, I was overjoyed. Steve told me that night that he had to go back to work the next day.

"I thought you were going to be able to get a week off once the baby was born, at least three days?"

"Sorry, babe. I want to be here but they have a new project at work that they need my input on. That promotion they gave me sure did a lot for my name at the company."

He said he would try to get Friday off, but to see if maybe my mom could come over this week to help me out in taking care of little Danny. My mom did come over the next day when Steve went to work, but I hoped that in the coming months Steve might be able to work a little less. Taking care of a newborn was hard work, and I couldn't rely on my mother to be there all the time to help me. She did the best she could but she had picked up a part-time job as a secretary now that I had moved out of the house and my older brother Tim was out on his own.

The months seem to fly by and I became even more frustrated when Steve started staying at the office until later at night. Often, he wouldn't be home until dinnertime. Our little boy was growing up right before our eyes. He was almost a year old and Steve had been around so little it seemed, whether it was long nights at the office or golfing on the weekends with potential business customers.

"I wish you were around to see Danny more often." I approached him one night. "I feel like you're missing out on a lot by not spending that much time with our son."

"I have to work all these extra hours, Patty. All that money I make keeps us in this house we live in. I have to bring these guys to the golf course to secure business for the company. Bobby Richards is doing the same thing."

This was true. Margie had been telling me all about how busy Bob was at work, but at the time she never told me whether it bothered her or not.

"But sometimes I wonder if you even want to be with our son. Like work is more important."

Steve looked at me rather angrily. I had never seen this look before in his face. "Work is important. It's my job to make the money for this household—for me, you and Danny. So I need you to take care of our son while I'm busy."

It had been more than a year since I had given a piano lesson. Of course I loved watching my soon grow up, waiting for his first steps, his first words. I had thought that Steve and I had left open the possibility that after having our first child, I could return to giving piano lessons like I was doing before and during my pregnancy. And if taking care of my son wasn't enough of a task, I had to keep the house up too while Steve was at work. I was expected to do the cooking and cleaning, not to mention occasionally handling more renovations to the house. I barely had time for myself anymore. Sometimes Margie and I were able to spend time together in the afternoons, both of us with our children in tow, but it seemed all that we ever talked about was our children and our husbands. Finally, one day I had to see if Margie was having some of the same thoughts as I was.

"Margie, have you ever thought about what you might be doing with your life had you not had little Bobby almost right after you were married?"

"What are you talking about, dear? Little Bobby wasn't an accident. We knew we wanted to start our family right away. I couldn't wait to have a child and be a mother."

"You ever wonder if you could have had a career being a writer of some sort? You were always so good at writing stories in school, you know." I replied.

"Oh, those were all just make-believe nonsense. How could I have made money doing that? Besides, I wouldn't think of pursuing a career now. I have Bobby now and my little boy needs taking care of."

There was a time when Margie thought she might really be going places with all her crazy ideas for stories and poems. Like me, she used to romanticize the sea and draw inspiration for a lot of her work from our time spent at the beach and at the sea wall. I started to wonder if my longing to go back to being a piano instructor might not have been such a good idea after all.

VIII

The turn of the decade saw my approaching third wedding anniversary with Steve. I still loved Steve with all my heart, despite my disappointment at him not being home as much to watch our son grow up in his early years. When he was around, however, he was an exceptional father. Steve couldn't wait until Danny was old enough to play catch so that he could teach him all about his favorite team, the Boston Red Sox. I was overjoyed just watching my husband play with my little boy. It temporarily quieted my personal anguish for not having been able to resume my part-time job. It also reminded me how lucky I was to have a guy as great as Steve in my life, as well as my handsome little boy. I really did live a great life: my house had come a long way and it finally felt like it had our personal stamp on it, so to speak. We certainly had enough money to live comfortably on, and my parents as well as his, did not live very far away. Margie, too, lived even more luxuriously than I did. And luckily for me, she lived only ten minutes from my home.

Any stranger looking in on my life would think I was crazy to be disappointed by some aspects of it. Yet I was. For all of the joy my marriage, my son, my family and friends gave me, I could not ignore the fact that I had become so domesticated that for almost three years I had not been able to start giving piano lessons again. Occasionally I wondered where I would be, then twenty-two years old, had I not married Steve. There was a pretty good chance I might have been married to someone else besides Steve. But I thought that there was a good chance too that I

might have been able to pursue a career and apply my talents towards a job. Surely, I had more capability that extended beyond baking an apple pie. The thing that bothered me the most though was that I wholeheartedly believed that in a marriage, I should have been able to balance both a small job and raising my child. My job as a piano instructor never was more than part-time; it was only six or eight hours a week. Why couldn't Steve change his work schedule slightly to accommodate for something that gave me personal gratification and something to occupy my time besides domestic activities?

Then, in February 1950, I heard Senator Joseph McCarthy give his speech about communist activity infiltrating the American government. Suddenly, the familiar life pattern I had become so embedded in took on a whole new meaning.

"I can't believe what the radio just broadcast for us." I said to Steve, trying to hide my fear behind surprise.

"Doesn't surprise me, babe. I've always suspected that there were commies hiding out in our country. About time we start weeding them out and making them pay for their traitorous actions."

I couldn't ask Steve if McCarthy's words scared him, but I was surprised to hear my husband act so nonchalantly about the words we both had just heard. "What if they start targeting everyday Americans, Steve? Who is to say that they won't start doing that soon too?"

"I hope they do, you know. We need to protect our wives and children, our community institutions, our *values* from such dangerous political activity."

Protect our wives and children? I was glad Steve was showing an element of concern but I wondered whether this meant he might try even harder to keep me and Danny safe at home, away from the dangers of an unstable world. At least in our town—our world—we had stability.

Save for the radio, the terrors and threats of the outside world could not infiltrate our home. Our boy needed to be raised in that safe environment, one that we could control. More importantly, I had to be the one who made sure he remained sheltered in that environment.

The anxieties that one inevitably has in raising children were only heightened by my new responsibility to keep my son sheltered in suburban life, as far away as possible from the harsh realties of the world. It wasn't just my son who was escaping real life. I was, as well as Steve and everybody else that we knew in town.

As the years progressed throughout the decade, my life on the surface played itself out like a storybook, where living the suburban dream was the plotline. Wives and mothers were expected to go to company picnics, listen to the advice of in-laws, and go to school meetings. Supposedly, taking care of my family was at the center of me being. In a lot of ways it was, and not just because the culture told me it was supposed to. For all of our troubles along the way, being married to Steve was wonderful. I loved him and together we raised our son. I had almost every material possession I could have ever wanted. One year Steve bought me a diamond necklace for our anniversary. A couple of years later, my birthday gift was a brand new vacuum. We did need a new vacuum but *I* didn't need a new vacuum. The line between what I really needed to live a fulfilling life and what I was supposed to need had been crossed. And I was powerless to do much about it. I was tied to my life, and in a way, I was happy about it. But I became a wife and a mother at so young an age; I never had a chance to pursue a life other than a domestic one. My brief time as a piano instructor was a wonderful experience that I look back on with the fondest memories. Teaching those young children how to play piano, guiding their hands along the keys, I saw a vision of my younger self; still too young to know that all the ideas I had about my life ahead of me might never be realized.

> *I'm done mom! I'm done with my piano lesson! Can I go down and sit on the sea wall with Margie soon, pleaseeeee? Guess what? I learned a new song today! I can't wait to play it for you and Dad! I want to make you so proud someday Mom…*

My mom and dad were always proud of me and looking back on the past decade or so, I think I made myself proud too. Steve still works at the advertising agency, having gotten another promotion that actually allows him to work a few less hours every week. That gives him more time to go to Danny's baseball games. Danny is twelve now, a great student and a budding athlete. I feel blessed to have raised such a wonderful son. As for me, Danny is still young but now that he is at school during the day, I have a little more free time for myself. I still do the cooking and cleaning, realizing full-well that chores like this would have been part of my life in one form or another anyway. There are still days when I wonder what my life would have been like had I not married Steve right after high school, had I not gotten pregnant less than a year later. But for all the sacrifices I have made, I have learned to be grateful for what I had and for what I still do have. The era that I grew up in and raised my family in never wanted me to be the breadwinner, never wanted me to be a woman working outside the home. My work *was* in the home. But not just taking care of my husband and child and occupying myself with domestic chores. Someday soon, I know I'll be giving piano lessons once again.

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