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My Life So Far

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PREFACE

If we do not know our own history, we are doomed
to live it as though it were our private fate.
—Hannah Arendt

The past empowers the present,
and the groping footsteps leading to this present
mark the pathways to the future.
—Mary Catherine Bateson

I was born December 21, the shortest day of the year. I've always seen a year as a circle, with December settled down at the bottom, like 6 on a clock. Then, when the new year starts up again, I see myself moving upward, counterclockwise, till, twelve months later, I've come full circle, back to the bottom again, to that shortest of days. On the day in 1996 when I turned fifty-nine, I realized that, assuming I live to be ninety, give or take, the next full circle would raise the curtain on my third act.

I've had a career both in film and theater for more than forty years, and I know something about third acts. Haven't you ever been to a play where the first two acts seemed confused, then along came the third act and pulled it all together? Ah-ha, you said to yourself. So *that's* what that scene in the first act was leading to! Or, conversely, the first two acts can be brilliant, and then in the third, things disintegrate. However, the third act is definitely key, the payoff that pulls the seemingly random bits and pieces of the first two acts into a coherent whole.

The big difference between life and acting, though, is that in life there's no rehearsal and no "take two." This is

it; better get it right before it's over.

To have a good third act, you need to understand what the first two have been about. To know where you're going, you must know where you've been. Call me a control freak, but I don't want to be like Christopher Columbus, who didn't know where he was headed when he left, didn't know where he was when he got there, and didn't know where he'd been when he got back. So on my fifty-ninth birthday, I knew I had some serious thinking to do.

In *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott writes, "If you want to make God laugh, tell her your plans." Quite right. But when I talk about figuring out my third act, I'm not talking about making plans. I'm talking about being disciplined enough to learn what my past has to teach me, brave enough to take those lessons into my heart—to own them—and to commit myself to doing what is necessary to make them a part of my future. This is hard.

I once saw a quote from dancer/choreographer Martha Graham framed and hung on a wall in a ballet studio. It said DISCIPLINE IS LIBERATION. At first that seemed like an oxymoron—isn't liberation the opposite of discipline? But discipline here doesn't mean tightness and rigidity, or punishment for wrongdoing. It means being so committed and so fully contained that you can let go; so deeply connected that you can detach; so strong that you can be gentle. Liberation takes intentionality, deliberation, courage, and—yes—discipline.

I think of the tremendous discipline it took the great ballet dancer Rudolf Nureyev to be temporarily liberated from gravity and soar through the air. I think of Greg Maddux, for many years the Atlanta Braves' outstanding pitcher, and the discipline that went into his ability to stand on the mound at the bottom of the ninth inning of the World Series and be physically and mentally relaxed.

For me, discipline, liberation, means acknowledging my demons, banishing them to the corner, seeing my past and excising the old patterns and baggage to make room for stillness. It is within stillness that I will hear the small voice and know where it is leading me. Call that voice what you will, but it has always been there, although during my second act—and in much of my first, for that matter—it was too risky for me to hear it.

It is taking discipline to liberate myself into a quieter third act, discipline in order to live with the awareness of my death.

I don't want to die without knowing who I am.

Remember those toys where you'd drop some hard, dry kernel thing into a glass of water and it would expand into an underwater landscape of mystery and color? Well, for me, to be disciplined and to live with the awareness of death means taking every minute and dropping it into a glass of water and having it swell into something fuller, more complete.

To understand why I decided to prepare this way for my third act, I have to take you back a few years, to my forties. My father was dying. I would sit by his bedside in silence for long periods of time hoping that he would talk to me, say something about what he was thinking and feeling as he was being rocked away from us to that eternal place. He never did.

If he couldn't come to me, I would go to him. I would focus on his face and try to put myself inside his body, become him. I remember feeling so profoundly sad for him —not that he was dying, but that he had never really been able to get close to me or to my brother, Peter. I felt sure he must regret that. I would if I were him.

This experience taught me that I was not afraid of dying. What I am terrified of, however, is getting to that place

right at the edge of life when there's no time left, being filled with regrets, and having no time to set things right.

Of course we always have regrets—things we've done that we wish we could take back or erase. I have significant ones that will haunt me forever, which I hope I have been brave enough to confront in this book. But it's what you *didn't* do that you know you *should* have done, rather than what you *did* do that you *shouldn't* have done, that's the worst: the if-onlys and what-ifs.

"Why didn't I tell her how much I love her?"

"If only I'd been brave enough to address that old fear of mine."

I began thinking a great deal about these things in my late fifties. I had begun to go through deep inner changes—changes that I didn't fully understand until I began writing this book. I realized then that to avoid regrets, I would have to start, while I was still healthy and strong, to name what those might be—and to do something about them. I needed to live consciously, and I knew it would mean facing things that frightened me—like intimacy.

All this washed over me on my fifty-ninth birthday, in 1996. It was now or never. Fish or cut bait. In a year I would be sixty. One friend of mine said she slept through her sixtieth; another said he "went into hiding." Now, don't get me wrong. I hate getting old—it's a vanity and joints thing. But I knew that I would have to do what I usually do when I'm scared of something: sidle up to it, get to know it, and make it my friend. I have made the truism "Know thine enemy" work for me many times over the years. For instance, when I was in my forties, knowing that I was approaching menopause and the inevitable changes that would bring, I spent two years researching and writing a book with my friend Mignon McCarthy, called *Women Coming of Age*, about how women can prepare for

menopause and the aging process. When the changes did begin (much later than I had anticipated), I was prepared. I knew what was negotiable and what wasn't.

With all this in mind, I decided to fully embrace my upcoming sixtieth birthday by exploring what my life had been about up until then. Doing this changed me in ways I would never have foreseen. Coming to see my various individual struggles within a broader societal context enabled me to understand that much of my journey was a universal one for women—played out in different ways and with different outcomes, perhaps, but with common core experiences. This is what liberated me to write this book.

I also realized that it was time to talk about my personal experiences during the last five years of the Vietnam War. I want to do this partly to set the record straight but mostly because of what my experiences during those years taught me—about myself, about courage, about redemption. The most important of these lessons came from U.S. servicemen, from whom I learned that although we may enter the heart of darkness, if we are brave enough to face and then speak our truth, we can change and be set free.

Much has been said (not always in a friendly way) about the many variations of my life and how they have played themselves out in public; about the varied personas I seem to have taken on, the new faces that seemed to come with each new man in my life. I understand—now—what that was all about, and I explore it in this book. I hope that other women might see something of their own experiences in what I have to say about how a girl can lose touch with herself, her body, and have to struggle—hard—to get herself, her voice, back. Also, I believe that change can be a good thing, *if* you are fully *in* each phase and *if* the changes represent growth. For better or worse, I have been fully invested in each phase of my life, and I'm glad, because it enabled me to learn and grow. I hope this book will infuse

the saying “Life is the journey, not the destination” with flesh and blood, because I believe that it is more joyful to embrace and be in the journey than to assume you’ll ever “arrive.”

My life has been marked not only by change but by discontinuity. Bucking social, familial, and professional expectations, I never focused on a pot at the end of my rainbow, and I now think this *lack* of early focus is one of the things that saved me. Had I, out of fear or laziness or “normalcy,” done a freeze-frame on my earlier self, the self that wanted approval, well, I can tell you with certainty that I’d be sleeping through this third act … probably with the help of pills.

I feel that the very changing nature of my life helps to make my story relevant to other people and also to this modern era. Everything about our world today speaks to the need for flexibility and improvisation, yet young people still feel pressure to do life the way their parents did: deciding early on what they want to be when they grow up and committing to it. They feel there must be something wrong with them when it doesn’t work out that way. We’re brought up waiting for closure (when I graduate, when I get married, when I know what I want to do and become a grown-up), and we expect contentment to follow. Youthful dreams then give way to “reality” and we succumb to what *is* rather than striving for *what if*. Consistency can be a trap, especially if it leads to being consistently wrong rather than to stopping, admitting your mistake, and changing course.

One thing is for sure—the genie of “continual flux” is out of the bottle. Tectonic shifts in our global socio-psycho-economic realities have made constant change the norm—consistently! I believe in the words of the Sufi poet Rumi: “The alchemy of a changing life is the only truth.”

Certainly, my own life is proof that flux is often creative, enlivening.

I have structured this book into three acts. The first act I call “Gathering,” because it was in those first thirty years of my life that I took in all that had made me *me*—the tools, the experiences, and the scars that I would spend the next two acts recovering from, and also building upon. The first act is also when I gathered resilience.

The second act I call “Seeking,” because that is when I turned my eyes outward and began a search in the world, for meaning beyond the narrow confines of myself and my immediate life, asking, What am I here for? What are other people’s lives like? Can I make it better?

The final act is called “Beginning,” because—well, that’s what it feels like.

While the high visibility of my public life has not always brought personal peace and happiness, it has lent a certain universal quality to my various metamorphoses. In the course of my writing, I have realized that perhaps I can use this to advantage: I can peel back the surface layers of events with which you, the reader, already have an association and invite you to see them through a new lens, with new eyes.

I moved “out of myself”—my body—early on and have spent much of my life searching to come home … to be embodied. I didn’t understand this until I was in my sixties and had started writing this book. I have come to believe that perhaps my purpose in life is to show you—through my own journey—how and why this “disembodiment” happens, especially to women, and how, by moving back inside ourselves, we can restore balance—not just within ourselves but on the planet. I discovered that being disembodied rendered me incapable of intimacy, and so halfway through my second act, I went on a search for that.

I have dedicated this book to my mother. For me, this is a big deal—a way for me to begin to restore my own balance. You see, I have spent most of my life feeling and acting like an Immaculate Conception in reverse: born of a man, without aid of woman. For reasons you will come to understand, I have spent far too much energy obliterating all in my life that represented my mother. This has taken a profound toll. Dedicating this book to her marks another turning point in my attempt to live a full, conscious life.

So here’s to you, dear reader. And here’s to you, Frances Ford Seymour, my mother—you did the best you could. You gave me life; you gave me wounds; you also gave me part of what I needed to grow stronger at the broken places.

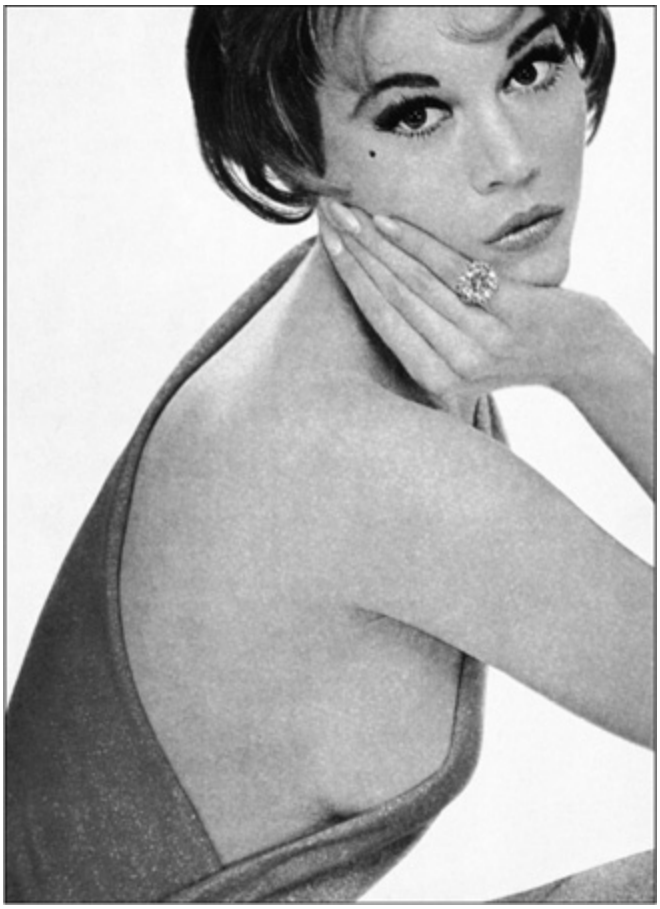
ACT ONE

GATHERING

Everything is gestation and then birthing.
—RAINER MARIA RILKE,
Letters to a Young Poet

At age two, totally focused.

Already the dead-serious Lone Ranger.



My photograph for Harper's Bazaar *by Richard Avedon, 1960.*

Plain Jane with bad hair.

A brief stint with the jet set at about nineteen.
(Yale Joel/Time & Life Pictures Getty Images)

With Dean Jones in Any Wednesday.

(Photofest)

Barbarella between takes.

CHAPTER ONE

BUTTERFLY

Stay near me—do not take thy flight!
A little longer stay in sight!
Much converse do I find in thee,
Historian of my infancy!
—WILLIAM WORDSWORTH,
“To a Butterfly”

I SAT CROSS-LEGGED on the floor of the tiny home I’d created out of cardboard boxes. The walls were so high that all I could see if I looked up was the white-painted tongue-and-groove ceiling of the glassed-in porch so common in Connecticut in the 1940s. The porch ran the entire length of the house and smelled of mildew. Light from the windows bounced off the ceiling down to where I sat, so I didn’t need a lamp as I worked on the saddle. I was eleven years old.

It was an English saddle, my half sister Pan’s, from the time before she’d gotten married, sold her horse, and moved to New York City—from the time when we still believed things would work out all right.

I held the saddle on my lap, rubbing saddle soap into the beautiful, rich leather, over and over. … *Make it better. I know I can make it better*. The smell of saddle soap was comforting. So was the smallness of my home. This was a

place where I could be sure of things. No one was allowed in here but me—not my brother, Peter, not anyone. Everything was always arranged just so—the saddle, the soap, the soft rags folded carefully, and my book of John Masefield poems. Neatness was important … something to count on.

Mother was home for a while and if I leaned forward ever so slightly, I could look out my “door” down the length of the porch, to where she sat at an oilcloth-covered table on which stood a Mason jar. A butterfly would be beating its wings frantically against the glass walls of the jar, and I could see my mother pick up a cotton ball with tweezers, dip it into a bottle of ether, unscrew the top of the jar, and carefully drop in the ether-soaked ball. After a minute, I could see the butterfly’s wings begin to slow their mad fluttering, until gradually they would stop moving altogether. *Peace*. A whiff of ether drifted down to where I sat, making me think of the dentist. I knew just what the butterfly felt, because whenever I went to have my braces tightened, the nurse would put a mask over my nose and tell me to breathe deeply. In no time the edges of my body would begin to disappear. Sound would come to me from far away and I would feel a wonderful, cosmic abandon as I fell backward down a dark hole, like Alice to Wonderland. Oh, I wished that I could make that sensation last forever. I didn’t feel sorry at all for the butterfly.

After a while, mother would unscrew the lid; gently remove the butterfly with the long tweezers; carefully, lovingly, pierce its body with a pin; and mount it on a white board on the wall above the table. There were at least a dozen of them up there, different kinds of swallowtails, a southern dogface, a red admiral, a clouded sulphur, and a monarch. I never could decide which one was my favorite.

Once she took me with her to a meadow full of wildflowers and tall grasses where she went to catch her

butterflies. There was still an abundance of wild places—swamps, unexplored forests, and meadows—in Greenwich, Connecticut, in the 1940s. I watched as she moved through the grass—her blond, sun-blushed hair blowing in the wind—swooping down with her green net, then flipping the net quickly to close off the butterfly's escape route. I would help her get it safely into a jar and quickly screw the top on.

It puzzled me a little why Mother had decided to take up butterfly collecting. I don't remember her ever doing this when we lived in California. *I* was the one fascinated with butterflies. I was always painting pictures of them. When I was ten, right before we'd moved from California, I gave my father a drawing for his birthday. "Butterflies by Jane Fonda" was written up in the right-hand corner, and then two rows of them with their names written underneath in my tight, straight-up-and-down-careful-not-to-reveal-anything handwriting. My letter said:

> *May 19, 1948.*
> *Dear Dad,*
> *I did not trace these drawings of butterflies. I hope you had a happy birthday. I heard you on the Bing Crosby program. Every two days I will send you another picture of butterflies.*
> *Love, Jane.*

By the time Mother took up the butterfly hobby, I had turned eleven, Peter was nine, and we were living in our second rented house in Connecticut. It was a rambling two-story wood house perched atop a steep hill overlooking a tollgate on the Merritt Parkway. I could look out my bedroom window and count the cars. Prior to the move east, we'd grown up in California's Santa Monica Mountains and, instead of a tollgate, we looked out onto

the vast, shimmering Pacific Ocean. Maybe that is why my childhood fantasies of conquering all the enemies of the world were so expansive. Had I grown up overlooking the tollgate, I might have seen myself as an accountant.

This new house was on a large piece of property bordered to the west by an immense hardwood forest that, in the winter, became a leafless gray fortress. Then in the spring, dogwood would bloom, hopeful and white through the layered forest gray, and redbud would add slashes of magenta. By May, an array of greens would transform the woods once again. For someone who had spent the first ten years of her life seasonless in California, this ever-changing palette seemed miraculous.

The house had an uncomfortable Charles Addams–y quality about it, always too dark and chilly, and it had far more rooms than there were people living there, which added a sense of impermanence and awkwardness to its hilltop perch. There was Grandma Seymour (Mother's mother), Peter, me, and a Japanese-American maid named Katie. Peter says Katie's familiar presence with us after three years was comforting to him. I, on the other hand, barely remember her. But then Peter got more attached to people than I did. I was the Lone Ranger.

Mother wasn't with us much anymore, though I didn't know why. It was during one of the periods when she was back from wherever it was she went that the butterfly collection was started. Maybe someone had suggested that she get herself a hobby. Peter and I had stopped paying much attention to her being away, or at least I had. It had simply become a fact of our lives: Mother would be there, and then she wouldn't. When she wasn't there, and even when she was, Grandma Seymour would be in charge of us. Grandma was a strong woman, a constant presence in our early lives. But though I loved her, I don't remember ever running joyfully into her arms the way my own

grandchildren do with me. I don't remember her ever imparting grandmotherly wisdom or even being fun to be with. She was a more formal, stalwart presence. But she was always there to meet our external needs.

Around the house there'd be an occasional murmured mention of a hospital or of an illness, and right after we'd moved to Greenwich, Mother had been in Johns Hopkins Hospital for a long time, for an operation on a dropped kidney. Grandma took Peter and me to visit her there once, and I remember Mother telling me they'd almost cut her in half. But she'd been "ill" and in hospitals so much that it had lost any real meaning. Hospitals were supposed to make you well so you could come home and *stay*.

Ever since we had moved to Greenwich I had spent a lot of time in hospitals myself—me, the healthy one. I'd developed blood poisoning, then chronic ear infections; then I started breaking bones. My arm was broken the first time during a wrestling match with a boy, Teddy Wahl, the son of the man who ran the nearby Round Hill Stables and Riding Club. Teddy threw me against a stall door. It hurt, but I walked home and didn't say anything—between Peter and Mother, we had enough hypochondriacs in the house. I was not going to complain. Instead, I sat in front of the black-and-white TV to watch *The Howdy Doody Show*, my favorite because it regularly included a short *Lone Ranger* film.

I sat carefully on my hands, as I always did when Dad was home, because I was scared he would see that I was still biting my fingernails. As we sat down to eat, Dad asked me if I'd washed my hands, and when I told him I hadn't, he exploded in anger, pulled me out of my seat and into the bathroom, turned on the faucet, took the broken arm (which I'd been holding limply by my side), and thrust it under the water. I passed out. He'd no idea that I was hurt and was very apologetic as he rushed me to the hospital,

where my arm was X-rayed and put into a cast. The worst part was that all this happened right before school started, my first year at the all-girls Greenwich Academy—just at the time when everybody would be checking out who was cool (we called it “neat” back then), who was good at field hockey, and whom they wanted to be friends with, I had to show up with my arm in a cast.

At the time, Dad was starring in the Broadway smash hit *Mister Roberts*. I now realize that I must have sensed that something was very wrong between my parents. Palpable tension was in the air: Dad’s anger and black moods; Mother’s increasing absences. Even if I had had the words to express what I “knew,” I’d already learned that no one would listen to words that spoke about feelings. So instead, my body was sending out distress signals.

There’s a set of photos of us taken around that time. Just after we left California, *Harper’s Bazaar* had come out to interview Dad and take pictures of the family “picnicking”—one of those setup jobs that make the children of movie stars feel like props. The pictures show us sitting on the lawn: Dad, Mother, Peter, me, and Pan (my half sister, the one with the saddle), who at sixteen was beautiful and remarkably voluptuous.

There is one photograph in particular that says it all. I discovered it in a scrapbook many years of therapy later, when I was able to see it with more perception and compassion. Dad is in the foreground leaning back on his elbows, looking as if he’s got something really good going on in his head that has nothing to do with all of us. I am kneeling next to him, looking intently at him, as I often did in our family pictures, showing clearly whose side I was on. Behind me Peter is playing with the cat, and Pan is lounging glamorously. And then, in the background, almost like an outsider, there’s Mother, leaning forward toward us with an expression of pain and anxiety on her face. I feel so

sad when I look at that face, which I've done often with a magnifying glass.

Why couldn't I have known? Why wasn't I nicer? I was ten years old.

Dad had come out of the navy at the end of World War II and (what felt like) the very next day had gone off to New York to start rehearsals for *Mister Roberts* while we stayed in California. When it became clear that the play was in for a long run, Mother decided to put our home up for sale and move east. She settled on Greenwich, thinking that the thirty-five-minute train or car ride from New York City would make weekend commutes easy for Dad. Plus, in that well-heeled Connecticut enclave, there would be homes to rent on large enough pieces of property so that Peter and I could continue our habit of roaming the outdoors. My parents were at least right about that part.

I don't remember Dad being around much after we moved to Greenwich. When he was there, I could almost feel his energy pulling him back toward New York, though I didn't really know why. I supposed it was just that Mother, Peter, and I weren't all that interesting. When he'd visit us I could sense that he didn't really want to be there. But Dad had been an Eagle Scout, and the commitment to doing one's duty was embedded in his DNA. I wish the Scouts had taught him how to make it seem less like a duty.

A faux family picnic in Greenwich for Harper's Bazaar *magazine. That's Mother in the background.*
(Genevieve Naylor/Corbis)

Sometimes Dad would come out on a Sunday and take Peter and me fishing for flounder in nearby Long Island Sound. Dad was usually in a bad mood, which meant these excursions weren't exactly "fun times," but I enjoyed them anyway—all of us together in the little rented motor-boat, the salty smells mixed with engine fumes, the anticipation as we'd pull out of the harbor, round the buoy, and head to sea. Because flounder are bottom feeders, we'd never go out very far before Dad would turn off the motor and tell us to bait our hooks. This was always the moment of reckoning.

Baiting the hook meant reaching into a bucket filled with reddish brown kelp, among which writhed long reddish brown bloodworms with what appeared to be claws in their

heads. Peter didn't like them at all. Peter, in fact, would refuse to touch them—which in itself took guts. Dad wouldn't even try to disguise the disgust he felt about Peter's squeamishness, and his moods would get blacker and blacker. Whereupon I, the Lone Ranger, would ride to the rescue and be man enough for both of us. I'd pick up that worm and stick the hook right through its squirmy head without even a shudder. I didn't do this to make Peter look bad. I loved my brother. I just wanted to prove my toughness to Dad and make the tension go away.

Peter was who he was. When he was scared he showed it; if he was sick, he'd complain about it—damn the consequences. I often wished he'd pretend like I did, just to make things easier. But, no, Peter was himself. And I, well, I'd gotten into the habit of leaving myself behind someplace in order to win Dad's approval. *Make things better. I know I can make things better*.

Once, Dad had us come into the city and took us to the circus. A New York columnist, Radie Harris, who knew our family, was also there and was quoted as saying:

> *I remember sitting in a box at the circus a few months after* Mister Roberts *opened. Hank sat just to my right. With him were Jane and Peter, and not once during the entire performance did he say a word to either child. And either the children knew enough to say nothing, or they might have been too intimidated to speak. He didn't buy them hot dogs, cotton candy, or treat them to souvenirs. When the circus was over, they simply stood up and walked out. I felt sorry for all three of them*.

Then one day, when I'd just finished breakfast and was heading out the door to school, I saw that Mother was standing at the entrance to the living room. She motioned