

## I Will Send the Police After You

“If you go, I will send the police after you,” she said in a firm, louder than usual voice. It was her mean tone and sent fear into my heart that was breaking with disappointment and defeat.

It was June 1958, and I had just graduated from high school with honors and a scholarship. Excited about being accepted to the University of California at Berkeley, I anticipated leaving home.

Mom pronounced her ultimatum.

“But Mom,” I said. “Why? You know all my friends are going away to college, why can’t I go?”

That was a mistake. When ever any one of my siblings or I said that, she seemed to be more defiant.

“You are not your friends. You are my daughter and you are going to the junior college like your sisters.”

That essentially was the end of the story. There was no discussion. Dad did not challenge her, even though he was present and had always until now been on my side. He could usually persuade Mom into accepting her third daughter’s ambitious plans, but not this time.

Dad worked at the Mare Island Naval shipyard as a welder, and eventually through additional classes had become a shop analyst. I still remember how he sat at the typing table in the living room at night studying and taking practice tests to improve his

position, eventually becoming a shop supervisor. We were a working class family depending on Dad's ethic of hard work. He had never failed us or me, until now.

We lived in Napa, California in a two bedroom, one bath home across the street from a shirt factory and next to a lumberyard. Our street dead-ended on this side of the railroad tracks. Dad had enlarged one bedroom for my two sisters and me. My oldest sister had the single bed by the window facing our large backyard. My other sister, older by 18 months and I slept in a double bed. We had two small closets, one chest of drawers with a mirror, and a small desk for studying. Dad also extended Mom's sewing room when my baby brother was born. At the same time, he enlarged the dining room.

There was one bathroom with doors between our bedroom and Mom and Dad's. The living and dining room were carpeted with beige wall-to-wall rugs, and the two-butt kitchen had linoleum flooring. If two people opposite each other bent over, at the same time, their rear ends would bump.

When Mom handed down her decision she was sitting in "her" club chair, in the living room, with her feet on the ottoman, and knitting, without even looking at me. I was sitting on the couch at a right angle close to her. Above me hung two tall paint-by-numbers images of Pinkie and Blue Boy that Mom had done. Without declaring the obvious, the images portrayed boys are stronger, and girls as fragile.

"The only reason women go to college is to get a husband," Mom said. An added cultural expectation for women in my Swiss Italian family was marriage, homemaker, and motherhood. It was seldom, if ever, questioned.

As I steadied myself to look into her eyes, I felt any defiance would result in retaliation, and possibly even the police coming after me. Being a seventeen year old, I

was a minor by California law. Legally I could not make my own decision. Mom's ultimatum also foretold the further breakdown in our relationship.

There was no possibility of reasoning or discussing the matter. Knowing the war between us was over for now, I went to the bedroom trying to understand, yet confused by her meanness and finality of her decision for my life. Without any knowledge of a university education that my closest friends all had with their parents, somehow my ambition seemed out of line with what was expected of me. Flopping face down on the bed, I let the decision sink in, and the tears flow. I was deflated after the excitement of graduation, and honors, and knowing that my best friends in high school were going away to college. I felt ashamed that I would be left behind and I could not share my mother's ultimatum even with my best friend Judy. However, I felt I owed it to Judy's Mom to tell her, as she had been supportive, but loyalty to the family won out.

During my two years of self-imposed moodiness at home, I kept my hope alive by recalling one summer evening when I was eleven years old that inspired me not to give up my desire to shape my future. I had finished the last sentence of *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell, alone in the bedroom. It was evening as I marched through the narrow, darkened kitchen to the larger well-lit living room. I announced to my family, "If I do not mend my ways, I will be just like Scarlett O'Hara." Mom smiled dismissively, Dad nodded approval, and my siblings looked puzzled, except for my older sister who smirked. And then they all returned to their reading or knitting without any inquiry or encouragement. I knew right then that I needed a larger world to explore.

My dramatic announcement to my family was perhaps overstated. What were “my ways” as an eleven year old? Being obedient was one. Another was being too fearful to question authority. Unlike Scarlett, I wasn’t vain, deceitful, charming or southern.

I did know that my hometown was not big enough for my future unknown plans of having a different life as a woman than was culturally assumed. But like Scarlett, I felt I would learn the skills needed as I pursued the journey. I think the book propelled me to be vigilant, declaring to myself that my circumstances were not going to define me.

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Without my parents financial support to augment my scholarship, I resigned myself with regret to live at home and go to the local junior college. So, like any heroine in her own novel, I secretly plotted my departure by accepting two years of purgatory, earning top grades in college-transfer courses, working as a dental assistant, saving my money, and forsaking a social life to study late into the nights, while being hard to live with at home. In other words I was the bitch in the house.

I was not sure I believed Mom’s threat. Naively I felt I could have resisted the police more easily than defying my mother. I learned growing up the heritage of pleasing others. I remember as a child the pressure to conform in our family. We were discouraged from speaking Italian. We only heard it once a week when my dad spoke it to his father, who we visited every Sunday afternoon. I loved those visits, as dad and grandpa sat on his porch drinking his homemade wine, while my sisters and I played hide and seek in his large front garden of tall bean stocks, corn stocks and various other vegetables.

It was important to my family that we be American. Mom told us, “We are Americans. We speak English.” Italy, under Mussolini, had allied himself with Hitler and

Germany initially in World War II. There was prejudice against Italians for being on the wrong side of the war, and suspicion about the Mafia hung in the cultural air. There were and still remain historical differences between Switzerland, which stayed neutral in war, and did not support Mussolini's invasion of Libya prior to the build up to WWII. It was important to our family that we were descendent of Switzerland, the Italian part, and not from Italy. Mom would constantly remind us saying, "We are Swiss Italian, not Italian."

Our surname had been Americanized from Brazzi (the Italian pronunciation would be "Bratzi" with a roll of the tongue on the "r") to Brazzi. It served me well when I ran for Commissioner of Activities in high school and won on the slogan "Let's be snazzy, vote for Brazzi."

I grew up knowing, that like my two older sisters before me, I was expected to get two years of junior college education after high school, marry, and have children. It was assumed that my full-time job as an adult would be to make a home, support my husband in his work, and raise our children—just like my mom. Mom would remind me to take "useful" courses in high school, like typing and business, and not the foreign language and science classes required for admission to the university. I can still hear her practical advice: "It's important to have a skill you can fall back on in case things don't work out," implying secretarial skills given the possibility of divorce or widowhood or other tragic events that would leave a dependent woman helpless.

By the time I got to high school, the truth was I didn't even know how to apply to college. The Dean of Women, who was also my best friend Judy's mother, Mrs. Bowman, recognized my potential and guided me to enroll in college prep courses. She also mentored me through an application to the University of California at Berkeley, her alma

mater. I don't recall if I told my parents I was applying. If I did not, it was for concern Mom would allege that I was aiming higher than what was my expected path. Or plainly put was, "too big for my britches."

I always knew Dad supported me. He had a very gentle way of parenting. I don't recall him ever lecturing me, or being demanding. He seldom told me what to do. He did not so much give me advice but by his example of kindness and congeniality, he showed me how to live. And though he did not have knowledge about college, as he himself had an eight-grade education, he did not stand in my way. I knew if he had knowledge, he would have shared it with me.

But what could have helped me was for Dad to challenge my mother's dominant opinion of women and college. Or help me figure out why she was so opposed to me going away to college. He could have been encouraging me to go to college, like my friends' parents did. It would have been supportive to have a reasonable conversation about allowing me to borrow the necessary funds beyond my scholarship, for the housing and books needed for UC Berkeley. Even though how to finance college was unknown to my parents, and me a rational conversation attempting to figure it out would have provided encouragement, rather than an order that I would be apprehended by the police if I had accepted and gone to UC Berkeley as a freshman.

During my two years of tuition free junior college education, I had worked and saved what I thought was enough money for my junior and senior years at the University of California, San Francisco. I had applied and was accepted to the dental hygiene program in the School of Dentistry, at the encouragement of the dentist I had worked for as a dental assistant for two years while attending the junior college. It turned out that my

savings were only enough for one year, despite the fact that I was frugal, and employed in the school cafeteria five days a week making sandwiches before my eight o'clock class.

The kitchen staff never let me leave without insisting I take a sandwich for my lunch.

When, in my senior year, the Dean of the Dental School told me there were funds that I qualified for based on my academic record, I found out just how opposed my parents were to allowing the university to assist me financially. Instead they loaned me enough money for my last year, which I paid back with interest two years after I graduated. I believe they were too proud to let even an educational institution finance their daughter's education.

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In adolescence, I had realized that my future would be in the larger world, beyond my hometown. I knew that I would challenge both my families and cultural assumptions about women. I did not know, however, that I would be hindered by these assumptions about women, marriage and work, and at times disadvantaged by them.

I did not know that I would be discouraged from applying to medical school because I was a woman. I did not know that I would be paid less than a man for comparable work because I was a woman. I did not know that I would be denied a credit card, because I was a single woman. In the 1960s, the time I was entering UC San Francisco, a bank could refuse to issue a credit card to an unmarried woman; even if she was married, her husband was required to cosign. It took federal regulation in the Equal Credit Opportunity Act of 1974 to make these practices illegal. I did not know in 1963 when I made an appointment at a nationally known brokerage firm that I would be

dismissed with a smirk by a stockbroker of my own age, and denied my request to open an account to purchase stocks, because I was a single woman.

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Looking back with nostalgia peppered with experience, my families and cultural expectations gave me the opportunity to become who I am, the hard way. In truth, I wasn't given the skills that I needed, but I learned them, often faking it until I could practice them more comfortably. But isn't it the most fairly earned way to own knowledge, by working hard for it rather than having it given to you?

However, if given the chance I would have done some things differently. I would have run for Student Body President instead of Commissioner of Activities, with my winning campaign slogan, "Let's be snazzy vote for Brazzi."

I would have tried harder to find a way to reason with my mom and actively elicited help from my Dad. In my own persistent way I did confront her indirectly in my adult life by breaking the stereotype of women of the 1950s and 1960s and beyond.

I would have believed my math teacher, and Dean of Student Activities, Mr. Fatinos, who wrote in my yearbook, "Without a doubt one of the few outstanding students that I've had the pleasure of working with. Keep your sights up high, Donna. You can be anything you set your mind to. A job well done, in and out of the classroom."

I would have dismissed my male college counselor's advice when he said to me, "My dear, women who go to medical school don't marry and have children." I would have set my sights higher and gone to medical school instead of dental hygiene.



I would have asked the young stockbroker in 1963 to explain in detail why I could not open an account and hopefully watched him squirm as he ran out of reasons why unmarried women could not invest in stocks.

I would have learned earlier that money is a resource, not a limitation. I would have learned earlier that, within reason, money does not have to dictate or limit choices.

Though I didn't become a medical doctor, I am a doctor of philosophy. I've heard it said that Ph.D. stands for piled higher and deeper. And that suits me perhaps more than being a medical doctor. What interests me are the mysteries of how people make choices, and how knowingly or unknowingly we are shaped by different cultural assumptions that support and hinder us on the journey of life. In the 1940s and 1950s, Mom was a stellar example of what was prescribed for women. And though my experiences in my family starkly confronted what I aspired to for myself, Dad especially and Mom did provide a physically safe and lovingly comfortable place for me to grow up. They also taught me values of family loyalty, pride of heritage and by necessity, frugality.

My experience continues to make me grateful to women who made their fight publicly and politically like Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, Billie Jean King, and Anita Hill and multiple other women—who challenged female stereotypes and initiated the second wave of the feminist movement.

I recognize that my family and culture was dominated by assumptions that were hard, very hard, to challenge, and that it hindered me. But with passion I shaped an identity that was different from my family and cultural assumptions.

With determination and perseverance, what was not given to me, I learned by observation, and unexpected help from my best friend's mom, Mrs. Bowman, and

encouragement from Mr. Fatinos. My growing up was the hard way, because I went against expectations. Not every door was open, and there were some that were slammed forcefully shut. Today, I can claim my knowledge as my own. It was not given or handed down to me. I had to fight for it as an adolescent and into adulthood. I had to figure things out for myself. And in the process, I shaped my life. I am able to claim my experience and pass it on to others.