Mary Cantrell

The Women’s Party

The year I started high school, my mother gave up nylons for toe socks, quit shaving her legs and changed her name from Andrea to Ann. Up to that point, she’d worked a series of glorified secretary jobs unbefitting a woman of her talent, and now she was going to pursue her life-long ambition: she was going to write a book. It was going to be a feminist manifesto, based on her short, unhappy marriage to my father. The world was changing, she said, and she wanted to be part of the change.

“Girls, I’m not a maid,” she told my sister Missy and me. “I’m not a chauffeur or a cook. I am your mother, yes, BUT!” she raised her index finger, “first, I’m your friend, and I want us to treat each other with dignity and respect.”

We were still living with Paul Everitt, then. Paul’s father was an oil man, and Paul had been swept into the family business right after college, a fact he often lamented since he never had the chance to find himself. Paul had hobbies, though. He collected antique toys and smoked marijuana out of a genuine hookah. Later he expanded his father’s business by selling renovated filling station signs to restaurants and novelty shops. But while we were there, he referred to his father as the tyrant and vowed he would someday shuck it all to travel around the country on a Harley.

The thing I remember most about Paul’s house is that it wasn’t a house to live in; it was a house to look at. The living room, for instance, was full of arrowheads, pottery, baskets, Chippewa dolls, tom toms, books of Indian folklore, artwork. Like most Oklahomans, Mom had a little Indian blood in her, enough, she thought, that Missy and I might get grant money for college. Paul, on the other hand, was of European descent. On the dining room walls there were black and white portraits of majestic looking relatives whose names Paul couldn’t remember. The furniture had belonged to his great-great grandmother, and its crisp elegance reminded me of something you’d find behind the roped off sections of a museum.

Then there was the bathroom, the “Political John,” as Mom and Paul called it. The wall paper, which Mom had designed herself, was a collage of political cartoons, presidential caricatures, famous quotes, peace signs and chubby red hearts. Campaign buttons dating back to Roosevelt framed the mirror above the sink, and ivory figurines of all the presidents, from Washington to Ford, stood in a neat row on the counter. Even the toilet paper was red, white and blue, each square a miniature American flag to match the stars and stripes on the curtains. When you closed the door to pee, a huge “I Want You” Uncle Sam poster glared and pointed.

The bathroom was a big hit with Mom’s newly formed Women’s Support

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Group. They gathered once a week to share stories of broken marriages, lazy husbands, unsatisfactory lovers, and they’d marvel at the bathroom’s decor. “Writers are eccentric.” Mom would say, prompting someone to ask about her book. By eavesdropping on these meetings, Missy and I were able to keep track of the progress Mom was making on the book. We’d swipe Brie, pate, homemade french bread, Pepperidge Farm cookies, cider for me, wine for Missy, and we’d smuggle it to the top of the stairs, where we perched to listen.

Mom gave pep talks to the other women. “Paddle your own canoe and let him swim,” she might say. Or, “A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle.” They did role playing, some of the women expressing their grievances while others pretended to be the gruff, deep voiced men who didn’t put the toilet seat down, or who refused to wash dishes. Usually, the role playing ended in a sort of feminist slapstick with everyone hugging, clinking their wine glasses together to toast “independence and success.”

Eileen Butler, my very impressionable best friend, found every aspect of my family life fascinating. Eileen lived across the river near the refineries, but her mother dropped her off at my bus stop every morning on the way to work, then picked her up at my house in the afternoons. When I told her that Mom was writing a book, she was predictably envious.

“Man, Jenny, your Mom is so entirely cool.” She shook her head. We were waiting for Mr. Green’s theatre class to begin, sharing a bag of pretzels.

I shrugged. “Yeah. I guess she’s pretty laid back.” Then I told her about Mom taking me to get a diaphragm. “No joke?” she said. “Gahh, my mom doesn’t even want me to date.”

I didn’t tell her that I hadn’t known what a diaphragm was for at the time, or that, now that I did know what it was for, I didn’t foresee any opportunities to use it in the near future. Instead, I quoted Mom: “A baby in the womb is a young woman’s doom.”

Eileen laughed. “My mom would never say that! No way!”

I’d come to regard it as my duty to enlighten Eileen, for her parents were what my mother would call “the lemmings of society.” Her father had been laid off for months now, and her mother worked a crummy receptionist job with an insurance agency across town. I told her I thought her mother should come to one of the women’s support group meetings.

“Really? God that’d be great!” But then she shook her head, wadding up the empty pretzel bag. “Naw, she doesn’t have the time.”

Class began then, and Mr. Green, a pale little man who wore black turtle-necks and Jesus sandals, made everyone pair off with a member of the opposite sex. We had to take turns wearing blind-folds while our partners guided us across the stage, down the steps, through the auditorium and back. It was another in an endless succession of “psychological exercises” that Mr. Green
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had learned at some actors’ workshop and Eileen and I rolled our eyes. The only exciting aspect of those exercises was the possibility of being partners with one of the popular boys, the ones growing caterpillar mustaches on their upper lips, but as usual, I ended up with Andy Morrow, a skinny kid who pushed his wire framed glasses off his nose by using his middle finger, and in so doing, flipped everyone off. I had no trouble guiding him around, but Eileen had Jeff Taylor the class cut-up. He swatted the air in front of him, pretended to trip about a dozen times and kept purposely bumping into Eileen, saying “Hey, where the fuck are we?”

When it was my turn, Andy walked slowly, held my sweaty hand and talked constantly, like a tour guide—“and to your right there’s a wall, and here come the steps. That was the first one, okay, here’s the second one...” After each step, I thought I was going to plunge into thin air, my legs moving helplessly beneath me, like in those falling dreams, the ones that woke me with a jerk, my heart pounding like a tiny fist. I was thankful that I didn’t have Jeff Taylor, who was probably looking down Eileen’s shirt as he dragged her around.

Afterwards, Mr. Green said, “You see boys and girls, as actors, we must trust each other.” Eileen called Mr. Green a “genuine fruit,” but we both wanted to be in next year’s production of Whose Afraid of Virginia Woolf? so we went along with his exercises. After school, we’d take turns playing Martha, trying to say “What a dump!” just like Elizabeth Taylor. We talked about our seemingly inevitable fame—becoming stars in our own high school, winning state competitions, moving to New York to be on Broadway.

And Mom was talking about New York, too. Her would-be agent, a friend of Paul’s agreed to look at the first five chapters of her book. Mom thought it would be a good idea to hand deliver it, so she and Paul were flying up there on Thanksgiving weekend. Despite Missy’s vehement protests, Mom arranged for us to stay in St. Louis with my father while they were away.

“I’m not going to leave you ghouls alone to mess up the house,” Mom said. “Besides, it won’t hurt your father to be responsible for you, for once in his life.” Mom had a lot of nick-names for us then—ghouls instead girls, sticklers instead of sisters, the clods instead of the kids. She had a few choice names for our father, too, and as far as we could tell, they were names he deserved. In the eleven years since their divorce, he’d been to see us only a hand full of times on his way to Dallas. He’d wear pinstripe suits that made him look twice as old as Mom, and his cologne made me sad and sleepy. On holidays or birthdays, he’d send flowery birthday cards, signed “Your Father,” with crisp ten dollar bills enclosed. During one of his visits, he shyly handed us tickets to see David Cassidy in concert. But Missy tore hers in half after he left. “David Cassidy makes me want to puke!” she said.

On the plane to St. Louis, Missy wondered what kind of gifts our father would try to “pass off on us.” She had rehearsed a biting refusal speech to recite
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should he dare to bestow us with some minor token of affection.

“You’re too young to remember what a royal jerk Dad is,” she told me, though she was only two years older.

“I know he’s a jerk, Missy,” I said. “Gahh, I’m not some kind of moron.”

“You were just a baby then. Be real.”

Sometimes, I did wonder if my memories of the divorce were real or dreamed up. I was four years old and still had imaginary friends, voices that chattered in my head like constant soap opera banter on the television. Missy was in school then, and after dropping her off, Mom went back to bed, or stared at the television. Somedays, she cried until her eyes were swollen shut. The world was suddenly quiet in that tiny one-bedroom apartment without my father’s booming voice.

It was quiet that Thanksgiving, too. My father was relaxed and friendly, dressed in powder blue slacks and a polo. He asked us about school and kept shaking his head, slapping his knee, saying “my goodness you all are grown!” Edith his wife, was a small woman who wore crocheted dresses and square heeled shoes. “We’re going to have a splendid time, ladies!” she said, giving us little hugs.

Before Thanksgiving dinner, my father said an elaborate prayer in which he thanked the Lord for everything—the food, our health, the nice weather we’d been having. Edith brought out turkey, homemade cranberry sauce and rolls, stuffing with walnuts, real mashed potatoes and gravy. It was the most delicious meal I’d ever eaten. I loved everything about it—the linen napkins, the dried corn cobs in the center of the table, the silverware, heavy and dense in my palm, gently tapping the bone-white plates. We ate in silence and watched football afterwards. My father fell asleep in his lazy-boy and snored loudly while Edith reclined on the sofa with her knitting.

The next day, Edith took us shopping. We pretended to like the Izod sweaters she bought us, even though we always wore T-shirts or sweat shirts with the names of rock bands. After lunch, she took us to see The Bad News Bears, which she found “offensive in parts.” Missy had already seen the movie, and the overwhelming aroma of Edith’s gardenia perfume made me whoozie, so I didn’t enjoy it either. That night, my father took us out for pizza. Edith described our day in detail, occasionally drawing us into the conversation with “Isn’t that right, ladies?” or “Didn’t we, ladies?”

“Well, good. Good enough,” my father said, patting his stomach. “I’m glad all my girls are getting along.”

That night, he and Edith went out with some friends, so Missy and I rummaged through their food and liquor cabinets. We opened a bottle of twenty-year old scotch and polished off a box of Edith’s diet cookies. We found

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the rock station on their cheesy stereo and turned it up loud.

“Do you think Paul and Mom’ll get married?” I asked Missy. She was eating a can of chocolate frosting, running her index finger around the rim and plopping it in her mouth, pulling it out with a pop.

“No way,” she said. “Mom thinks marriage is B.S.”

Actually, Mom defined marriage as an institution of oppression, but I thought different rules might apply with Paul. After all, Mom was just out of high school when she got pregnant and had to marry my father. With Paul, things were different. Missy and I thought Paul would be the ultimate in cool step parents. He never told us what to do, and for Christmas, he made us cassette tapes with all of our favorite songs. He labelled them “The Best of the Paul Everitt Collection” and “Paul Everitt’s Favorite Hits.” Years later, after Paul married his young secretary, Mom was living alone in an efficiency apartment, working at a new wave hair salon and driving her beloved BMW, a gift from Paul which she had painted hot pink immediately after their separation. Everything had changed, but those tapes made me ache inside, as if somewhere, I was still living at Paul’s house, waiting for my mother to write a best-seller.

The only tapes my father and Edith had were Barry Manilow’s Greatest Hits and Neil Diamond, “Hot August Night.” I knew Missy and I would never come back here to live, even if we wanted to. That night at their house, drunk and bored, we made long distance phone calls to friends at home, invaded Edith’s closet and tried on her too small polyester pant suits. We drew mustaches on the women in the back issues of Good Housekeeping. “Out of the kitchen and into the streets!” we wrote, and “Don’t make coffee, make policy!”

Weeks after we left my father’s, he sent us admonishing letters in which he described our behavior as “unforgiveable.” When he and Edith came home that night, though, the damage was already done, and we were already asleep. The next day, they took us to the arch and the planetarium and bought us Cardinal jerseys. We went to the art museum at Edith’s insistence (my father didn’t like all that “nonsense modern art”) , and ate a late dinner on the river-boat McDonalds. On the way home that night, Missy and I asked if we could watch Saturday Night Live.

“Oh yes! Certainly!” My father said. “We’ll just pop some corn and watch whatever you girls want. That’s just dandy.”

They brought us Hi-C and popcorn, and settled in their places—my father in his chair, Edith on the couch with the knitting. Chevy Chase began the show that night by doing his Ford impersonation, which consisted of falling down stairs.

“Now is he supposed to be the president?” Edith asked.

My father shifted in his lazy-boy, cleared his throat. “Why he doesn’t look a darn thing like Gerald Ford!”
Missy and I laughed at first, but Edith kept saying “Oh dear!” and “Oh my goodness!” and “Oh, now that is silly!” until we finally feigned exhaustion and went to bed. Our flight left early the next morning. Edith told us to “be sure to write,” and my father shook our hand, awkwardly pressing a fifty dollar bill in our palms. “Go buy yourselves a dress, he said.

Actually, we did use our father’s money to buy clothes, though they were hardly what he could’ve had in mind. We each got an Indian print dress and beads to wear to the all women’s Christmas party my mother was planning. The meeting with the agent had gone fairly well. “Of course, he’s reserving final judgment until it’s finished,” she explained, “but I’m tremendously pleased.” And she thought it would be appropriate to throw a party to celebrate her potential success.

Eileen, Missy and I were already asking her for her autograph, arguing about what she’d wear for the photograph that would go on the book’s jacket. “Has Johnny Carson called yet?” we’d ask. We helped address the invitations which pictured a collage of June Cleaver look-a-likes mopping, scrubbing, serving dinner, all of them smiling huge phony smiles. The caption on the front said “Good-bye Susie Homemaker!” There were no pictures inside, just the time and date of the party.

The week before the party, Mom bought a huge Douglas Fir and decorated it with outrageous ornaments—old pacifiers, a baby shoe, conch shells, a condom, crayons. She used the food processor to grind marijuana for “magic cookies,” which she cut in the shape of stars, bells and Christmas trees. A friend who owned a health food store made whole wheat finger sandwiches stuffed with avocados and sprouts, and Mom mixed a huge batch of something called “strip down and go naked punch.”

Missy and I went to Roma, Mom’s hairdresser, and got shag hair cuts just like her’s. Missy even bought a small tree for her bedroom and decorated it with the same crazy ornaments as Mom’s tree downstairs. All that week before the party, she begged Mom to let her drink. “Just don’t let me see you,” Mom finally said. “You can do whatever you want.”

Since it was an all women’s party, Paul left town that weekend, but he gave us his camera to take pictures. Even before the guests started arriving, the house had that feel of a party—Judy Collins on the turn table, candles and incense burning in the corners, a fire in the fireplace.

Mom didn’t come downstairs until the first guest knocked. “I’ll get it!” she yelled, descending the stairs in a hot pink flapper’s dress, a boa coiled around her neck, a scarf tied around her forehead, 1920’s style.

“Mom! You look excellent!” Missy said. “Where did you get that?”

I aimed the camera at her and she posed for a picture, her black cigarette holder in the air.
Soon, the house was as loud as a shopping mall. The women laughed and congratulated Mom as she greeted them. Missy and I roamed the party, taking pictures as the women poured drinks, took off their coats, hugged each other. Every so often, Mom would yell for us, gliding through the party, her wine glass held to her face as though it were a lantern guiding her through the dark. At one point, she pulled us towards a group of women. “You’ve got to get a picture of these shoes!” The women locked arms, arched one leg in front of the other, pointing their toes. “Those heels are a riot!” Mom shrieked. “My God, they’re wonderful!”

Mom enlisted two women dressed as suffragettes to pass out flyers that said “Rally in the Kitchen: 10:00.” Missy and I followed them with the camera, then we later joined everyone in the kitchen. Missy was on her third glass of punch, and I saw someone pass her a joint, which made her cough violently and turn pink. Mostly, though, she was drunk on atmosphere and too hyper to help me take pictures. She stood at the edge of conversations, laughed loudly at whatever was being said, nodding her head and practically shouting, “Right on!”

It turned out that, instead of a rally, Mom wanted to give the women a sales pitch for an odd assortment of sexual paraphernalia she was peddling. “Guaranteed to enhance love making.” Mom shouted above the laughter, “with or without your partner!” The women clapped and whistled as she passed out mail-order catalogues, and I kept taking pictures, remembering how Eileen’s mother sent her to school with Avon catalogues. Missy brought me a catalogue and insisted I take a close-up of her holding it next to her face, grinning like an idiot.

After a while, though, the smoke got to me, so I went up to my room and laid down. Downstairs, I could hear bits of conversations, laughter, Joni Mitchell singing “Natural Woman,” then two women clomping up the stairs. “I know it’s up here somewhere,” one of them said. The upstairs bathroom door opened and the women giggled, looking for the light switch.

“Can you believe her?” one of them said. “I mean, really, you’d think the whole point of the women’s movement was to give her an orgasm!”

The door clicked shut, and a few minutes later, they were stumbling back down the stairs into the party below. I stayed in bed, barely breathing and listened until their voices blended in with the hum of the party, then I got up and quickly loaded more film in the camera. Out in the hallway, I noticed big splotches of red wine splattered on the Persian rug, so I found a toothbrush and soap and tried like mad to scrub them out until, finally, realizing the rug was stained, I rolled it up and hid it in my room.

Someone had put on a Rolling Stones record and a group of women, Missy among them, were in the kitchen dancing, jumping up and down, their heads flopping from one shoulder to the next, mouths open, hands dangling at
their sides, the china rattling in the dining room. Mom was standing on the kitchen table, using a spoon for a microphone, belting out the words to “Brown Sugar.” When she saw me taking pictures she began shouting. “Someone get me a cigarette! I’ve got a trick! Someone give me a smoke!”

Someone lit a cigarette and handed it to her. Carefully, she placed it on her palm. “Okay, madam photographer,” she said, “get a load of this!” She tossed the cigarette in the air, and opened her mouth, looking up. It twirled towards her like a baton and landed in her right eye. “Shit!” she screamed, cupping both hands on her eye, stumbling backwards, off the table, into a chair... Immediately, the other women formed a tight circle around her. They helped her over to the sink and tried washing her eye, but Mom was crying now.

“What is it?” Missy yelled, pushing her way through the other women. Someone suggested that Missy, the only one somewhat sober and old enough to drive, take her to the emergency room. I found Mom’s coat and wrapped it around her, noticing a tear in the back of her dress. As Missy lead her out the door, I whispered, “Don’t let her take the coat off, Missy,” feeling suddenly sick as I imagined her surrounded by the stark whiteness of the hospital.

I watched as they strapped Mom in the passenger’s seat, her hands still covering her eyes. Missy disappeared in the darkness, and some of the guests followed her. The others wandered inside, picked up a few paper cups, then found their coats and, apologizing, insisting that I call them when I heard something, they left. I paced around the house, surveying the damage. The figurines in the bathroom had been knocked over and President Wilson was missing his head. Everywhere there were drinks spilled, cigarette ashes, beer cans and wine glasses, plates of uneaten food, albums scattered on the floor without their jackets. It took me a good five minutes just to blow out all the candles still burning, then I sat in the dark, waiting.

It was almost an hour before Missy came home, guiding Mom up the steps. Both her eyes were patched. Hot embers had slightly scorched the left eye as well, and the doctor said she’d need to wear the patch for a couple of days. We helped her up the stairs, into bed.

“Oh my ghouls,” she said, “My dear, dear ghouls.”

“It was a great party, Mom,” Missy said. “For real.”

We tip-toed out of the bedroom, closing the door behind us, softly. Missy didn’t even notice the carpet missing in the hallway. Instead, she said, “Well, I hope you didn’t get a picture of all that.”

I just thought of the mess downstairs, and how we’d have to clean it up all by ourselves.