

CHAPTER FIVE

Old Friends

Ladies and gentlemen, we have a reelly big *shewww...*”

The oft-mocked final word of Ed Sullivan’s famous television salutation was, of course, “show.” Ed’s distinctive intonation made it sound like something you’d lace on your foot—apropos, because he wore the advent of television historically well. Milton Berle may have beaten Ed into the picture box by twelve days with his own program, and Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca’s *Your Show of Shows* would perfect the comedy-variety format a few years later. But Ed’s talent showcase made the biggest impact on TV by far, launching the world’s best acts for a record twenty-three years. There is nothing comparable in the annals of entertainment.

Everyone, most of all Ed, was surprised the enterprise prospered. He was not a known performer, whereas Berle already was a star with a loyal national audience established through the club circuit and radio (where his shtick only partly worked). Ed was a syndicated gossip columnist, a rival of Walter Winchell since the mid-1920s, when they were both staffers at the tabloid *New York Graphic*. The two writers were a study in opposites: Whereas Walter was a slick, flagrantly bullying and nattily dressed talent hound, Ed was an awkward, mildly truculent and conservatively attired sports editor.

Ed lasted well beyond Winchell, Hedda Hopper, Louella Parsons and the rest of the famous hush-hushers. The key to his survival was that he became genuinely star-struck after leaving sports writing for celebrity tattling. Ed preferred fawning over fomenting, and after he caught my well-received solo nightclub debut at the Blue Angel, I thought it was cute that he went out of his way to mention me regularly (if sometimes erroneously) in “Little Old New

York,” his *New York Daily News* column. Performers always were battling to get their names into print; we’d bust our asses trying to cozen these writers. But here was Ed Sullivan, the big-time gossip columnist, pursuing me!

In September 1947, Ed invited me to be the star vocalist for his annual *Harvest Moon Ball* variety show at the Loew’s State Theater. The ornate Broadway house also was premiering the Anthony Quinn oil-drilling drama *Black Gold*: Big-city movie showings in the late 1940s were part of a larger package comprised of a newsreel, a cartoon, the featured film and a stage revue. Four or five complete programs were scheduled daily, and for many singers, including Frank Sinatra, they were a golden stepping stone from the esoteric club set to a general audience—and hopefully to Hollywood.

The *Harvest Moon Ball* was my first major Manhattan stage appearance and a tremendous break, as Ed could have hired Rosemary Clooney, Betty Hutton, Kitty Kallen or any of the hot singers. The production—the ultimate star trip for its host, who loved seeing his name on the marquee—combined professional acts with the fox-trotting, waltzing and jitterbugging winners of a citywide dance contest sponsored by the *New York Daily News* at Madison Square Garden. At the Loew’s, ventriloquist Paul Winchell and his inimitable “pardner,” Jerry Mahoney, filled the comedy slot, and I donned toy guns and a cowboy hat to perform a western number, “I’m the Rootinest Tootinest Gal in Town.” Partly out of gratitude, and partly out a desire to help him loosen his straitlaced public image, I folded Ed into my act, dragging him onto the stage to fasten my fancy, beaded holster.

I had no idea Ed was sweating bullets each time.

The critics were unanimous in their praise of my performance, with *Billboard* the most laudatory. “Monica Lewis, making her theater preem, was big-league caliber,” the paper gushed. “Miss Lewis’ errorless warbling won show-stopping ovations. The versatile deep-throated throbbler, with poise aplenty, delivered with gestures and pleasant grimaces, but she sold with her rich voice. Her encore had the clamoring-for-more audience refusing to accept her beg-off!”

The master of ceremonies refused to accept my beg-off, too. Ed was very protective and treated me wonderfully. The problem was that he fell in love with me.

I knew this was not good. Ed had a reputation in talent circles for having lots of girls. Moreover, he was twice my age, he was an Irish Catholic and he was married to a Jewish woman named Sylvia with whom he had fathered a daughter.

Oy vey!

Ed was sly, avoiding public overtures for fear of embarrassment. His kisses were rote show-biz, and in private he seemed cautious. The words changed but the theme never varied: “I’m really drawn to you. We’d make a great pair.” He did not ever say outright, “If you go to bed with me, I can do you a lot of good.” Apart from his constant editorial smooches, he worked every possible angle—sending flowers to my mom, squiring me to expensive restaurants “to talk business.” The conversation always ran to how his marriage was an understanding (read *permissive*) one.

From my family to my career, Ed insinuated himself into every area of my life. For a while it was merely an annoyance outweighed by our professional relationship. Until Ed’s jealousy started to flare.

I first witnessed this when my brother, Marlo, came to pick me up at the Loew’s one night. Ed thought Marlo was a boyfriend and demanded I identify the handsome guy waving to me from the curb. I told him.

“Oh, sure,” Ed said, pursing his lips and shoving his hands into his pockets.

“No, really,” I said. “Marlo’s in advertising and broadcasting. You ought to talk to him.”

It was a legitimate suggestion. It also was an opportunity to deflect Ed’s deepening attention, and I seized it.

Sure enough, Ed sweetened up fast upon hearing of my brother’s specialties. Ed had just been appointed chairman of the New York Heart Fund and needed help with the campaign, so I gave him Marlo’s number at the Blaine Thompson Advertising Agency. Having done promotional work for several of

Walter Winchell's self-serving causes, neither Marlo nor his wife, Mina Bess, was eager to welcome another gossip columnist into their lives. But after meeting and dining with Ed at Sardi's, they warmed to him, impressed by his intuitiveness and will to accomplish. The radio campaign Marlo and Mina Bess subsequently devised for Ed surmounted an in-progress recording strike to become a huge success, and the whole thing climaxed with a star-packed three-hour show at the Copacabana featuring Bob Hope, Jack Benny, Jimmy Durante, Pearl Bailey, Bing Crosby, Louis Armstrong, Martha Raye and yours truly, among many others who had volunteered for the drive.

My brother recognized at once that the vaudeville on the Copa stage that evening would transfer sensationally to television, which was just beginning to raise its feeler-like antennae in bars, taverns and storefronts. Ed flipped over the idea, urging Marlo to become his partner and pitch the concept to the networks.

"Kiddo," Ed said to my brother, "what's to stop us? If I can deliver the bodies free to every charity that comes along, I can do it for television! We could bring vaudeville back so big nobody will ever remember it died! So what if TV's still in its infancy? It'll grow, and we'll grow with it."

Marlo had his hands full as executive vice president of Blaine Thompson and also as owner-producer of the six-times-weekly radio series *Luncheon at Sardi's*, which Mina Bess scripted. But Ed's confidence and enthusiasm—he signed off notes to my brother, "Your lovin' cousin..."—were infectious. Granted, he couldn't sing, dance or tell a joke with a modicum of flair; he rarely discussed his shortcomings but did recognize them. He entrusted himself to Marlo and Mina Bess, who knew that some polishing of his Everyman appeal would enable him to shine as bright as any star.

Marlo presented the program concept to CBS, which greenlit it blindly, anxious to get a show—any show—on the air to compete with Milton Berle at NBC. With little faith in the viability of the new medium, CBS offered Marlo the title of producer and \$400 a week to deliver six acts and a line of shimmying, high-kicking dancing girls every Sunday. The network protected its paltry investment by proposing three generic titles: *Tops in Town*, *Talk of the Town* and

Toast of the Town. Only the third survived a trademark search, and it stuck for seven years until Ed and Marlo earned enough clout to rename the program *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

I was proud to have linked this momentous creative team. Even if it was just an excuse to get Ed off my back.



When *Toast of the Town* tapped the airwaves June 20, 1948, I was the opening act for Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis at the Copa. Martin and Lewis—“those hilarious stars of stage, scream and radar...,” crowed the ads—were a sell-out phenomenon. They just totally slew cosmopolitan New York, and if they were a tough act to follow, they were impossible to precede.

The show consisted of the dancing Copa Girls, a singer and the headline act, in that order, but the audience was so loud in its hankering for Dean and Jerry that the duo would start sparring during the final song. The first chanteuse took a powder quickly, and her replacement, Lisa Kirk, who also was appearing in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Broadway hit *Allegro*, could stomach the job only two weeks.

I received an emergency call from the Copa’s Great Dane of a manager, Jack Entratter, a former bouncer who could be tough but was always a pussycat with me. He was desperate for a resilient, good-humored pro.

“Dean and Jerry want to know if you’re interested,” he said. “It’s a tough slot because everybody’s waiting for the guys to come out.”

“I’ll take the chance,” I said, trying to temper my enthusiasm. “If I can’t get the audience quiet, it will be my fault.”

It *was* a difficult job. How do you silence an expectant crowd? I relied on every instinct, pulled out every trick. The first number was always a sacrifice because the women in the audience would be judging your weight and fashion sense while the men were making evaluative designs of their own. During the dinner shows, my rendition of “I’m in the Mood for Love” competed with tinkling silverware and shouts of “Pass the rolls!” (Within a few weeks, I’d

become confident and popular enough to demand a “no serving” rule during my performance.) The second song would be a soft, heart-wrenching piano or guitar ballad with a pin spot on my face that would shrink to black with the end of the tune. That always grabbed ’em.

It was prime exposure—everybody who was anybody came in at some point—and I remained with Dean and Jerry in New York until they closed. It also gave me good reason, other than being the producer’s baby sister, to appear on Ed Sullivan’s very first show.

Toast of the Town’s debut at the newly refurbished Maxine Elliot Theatre on West 39th featured Martin and Lewis, Rodgers and Hammerstein... and *me!* Ed’s high-profile roster, plus his hiring of Ray Bloch’s orchestra as the house band, made headlines in the trade and mainstream press. The Emerson Radio & Television Company quickly hitched to the publicity bandwagon as the first sponsor, and the excitement took on a life of its own.

Living up to the hype was a challenge. TV techniques were so primitive that there was no such thing, for example, as a simple zoom. Marlo, never the neophyte, marched me back to the hairdresser to lighten my ashy-blond color fearing it would show up too dark in black-and-white. He wanted me to sing a ballad in close-up, so he had me kneel on the edge of the stage with the sole camera barely a foot from my nose, clutching a bouquet that concealed the microphone. It was an oddly narcissistic stunt. There I was, my image reflected in a big, unblinking eye as fragrant petals brushed my chin and I crooned, “I’m in the Mood for Love.” With that kind of intimacy, how could I not be?

Since there was no fade to black, the stage manager had to douse the lights while the crew repositioned the camera for Ed. I almost tripped over the host as I groped my way off stage—not that he would have minded the inadvertent contact. For the guest shot I earned all of \$25. But I made it back a thousand times in publicity and in my half dozen or so return appearances.

The show was a smash despite its birdseed budget; for the first twenty-six weeks, overages came from Ed and Marlo’s pockets. At a time when attention deficit disorder was not a recognized problem, let alone a term, *Toast of the Town*

predated MTV by delivering its segments and acts rapid-fire to stave off viewer boredom. Marlo was the program's guiding light because Ed, while hip to dog acts and ventriloquists, was severely culture-challenged. Fortunately Marlo had the patience of an educator and the ability to make anyone feel better about their abilities with a simple embrace. He had an inordinate amount of class and successfully imbued some of that in Ed, who had none.

The facade Ed developed served him well. His earlier press-trench pugnacity evolved into a truly welcoming and gentlemanly persona on the small screen. With Marlo's help, he became a master at the game of appearances.

It wasn't all fun, however. For the program's duration, Ed suffered withering jabs at his mannerisms, faux paus and halting speech patterns. ("Ed Sullivan does absolutely nothing. *But*—he does it better than anyone else," quipped Alan King.) Yet the most astute comment came from Marlo, who later observed: "The medium had been around for many years. Now the message had arrived."

No one could argue or diminish that fact. The symbiotic, fourteen-year association between Ed and Marlo would make them millionaires and would see my brother named executive producer in charge of comedy and variety programming at CBS before he was thirty. Together they not only made CBS the number one network, they created a new phenomenon—the mass television audience.



Although Ed was preoccupied with fine-tuning the show and maintaining his newspaper column for most of that landmark summer, he was hot on my tail again at the first cool breath of fall. His pursuit intensified as his confidence grew with the program. He turned impossible.

I refused to become intimate with Ed and grew tired of his persistent checking-in. It felt uncomfortable, dangerous. Most of all, I wasn't having fun with him. He was too old for me.

Besides, I was dating other men. I was having a ball with a young disc jockey, William B. Williams, who became a very big star in New York on *The Make-Believe Ballroom* and originated the indelible nickname “Chairman of the Board” for Frank Sinatra. Yet Powerhouse Ed loomed large, his messages as overwhelming as they were overbearing. Thank God we didn’t have cell phones and answering machines in those days.

I decided to throw a bucket of ice water on Ed over lunch at Tavern on the Green. He was numb for a moment, then became agitated.

“Who’s gotten to you?” he demanded, paranoia flaring in his big blue eyes. “Who’s telling you to do this?”

Glancing over the edge of our banquette for eavesdroppers, I settled back and stared at him wearily. “I’m sorry,” I repeated. “I just don’t feel right about it.”

He dug in. “Sylvia doesn’t know. She wouldn’t care if she did.”

“But I do.”

“I’m in business with your brother!” he defended. “What could anyone say?”

Ed was turned down very infrequently, and his frustration with me was palpable. He blathered about asking the Cardinal for a dispensation. He could have been bullshitting, but alarms were sounding. Things were getting out of hand. By this time Ed was soliciting my parents vigorously and treating my entire family, including the little daughters of my sister and sister-in-law, to dinners on the town.

Ed’s gossip confreres saw through the familial gauze shrouding these public outings. Louis Sobol, a columnist for the *New York Journal*, kindly flagged me.

“People are saying you’re Sullivan’s girlfriend,” he cautioned. “You gotta watch that.”

Louie was a short but darling old man with a big mustache and a huge nose. I pointed out to Louie that I always kissed *him* goodnight whenever we saw each other. So what was the big deal with my doing that with Ed?

Louie wasn't buying. "It's not good for people think that you and Ed are an item. You're better than that. You don't want to be tossed in—and out—with the rest of his girls. Forewarned is forearmed."

His last statement struck me. It made me consider how my brother was killing himself with Ed's show, working straight through the weekends and barely seeing his own kids. My consorting with Ed on any level was risking a scandal.

Our attachment had moved well beyond flirting; it was phone calls and gifts from Ed almost daily. While I was appearing in Baltimore during a huge storm, a special messenger appeared at my dressing room door with a beautiful umbrella adorned with an expensive beaded evening bag. Inside was a card: "Stay dry, I love you."

I was starting to panic. This was much more than I had bargained for; all I wanted was my name in the newspaper columns and some of Ed's clout for better money and better bookings. But he was obsessive. I was afraid someone was going to get hurt, and I didn't want it to be me or my relations.

So I fled. Ed was furious. But at least he could work it out in confession.

The tenor of my ongoing association with Ed Sullivan was fair at best. After one of my 1949 appearances on the show, I took a guy I was seeing backstage to meet the host. Ed did nothing but size him up.

Later, Ed phoned.

"You're going out with very young men now, right?"

"He's older than I am," I said.

"He doesn't look old enough to take care of you. Are you in love with him?"

"No."

A pause, then: "Okay."

It was not okay. It never would be. Ed avoided becoming so attentive as to renew his status as a gossip target; he remained cordial because he was a friend of my family. But he held a grudge. In 1963, after I married Jennings, I asked Ed to send his talent scouts to hear our son, jazz pianist Mike Lang, who was playing at

the venerable Village Vanguard for winning the Notre Dame Inter-Collegiate Jazz Festival. It was a simple, reasonable favor. Ed failed to follow through.

I never talked to Marlo about my situation with Ed Sullivan, though I suspect he knew. Unfortunately he was stymied by being in the middle—unable to advise me and unable to tell Ed to get lost.

My brother never seemed bothered by this, but years later I was shocked to find that every one of Ed's shows on which I appeared was missing from the CBS archives.

With a bow to Oliver Stone, I say conspiracy.



“Sultry songlark.” “Vocal lovely.” “Vivacious thrush.”

The period 1947-48 was one of professional growth abetted by journalists plying me with increasingly overheated designations. “Songbird,” “chirp” and “canary” were the common ornithologisms for girl singers of the day. Apparently, they weren't sufficient to describe me. It was almost a relief when *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, in a fit of alliterative lasciviousness, dubbed me simply “luscious Lewis.”

My notices were uniformly positive. As much as I welcomed the accolades, some of them had little to do with my talent and frankly were just ridiculous. In 1948, a group of New York's top columnists named me one of fourteen newsworthy females whom they believed “combined the glamour of Helen of Troy with the compassion of Florence Nightingale.” The *New York Journal American* concluded, pen in cheek: “They are the gentleman's choice of maids in Manhattan who behave like queens, look like dreams, and are capable of doing a man-sized job like a lady.” Whatever the heck *that* meant.

All I wanted to do was make and promote great music. My voice increasingly was described as “torch style” by critics noting distinctions among the singing sisterhood. Certainly one distinguishing trait was my aptitude for identifying and airing future hits, which made me a hero to song publishers and tune players alike. While at Signature, I was the first vocalist to record “Put the

Blame on Mame.” And a little-known piece I had introduced through the same label, “I Have But One Heart,” was recorded a year later by Vic Damone and Frank Sinatra. It went through the roof.

I continued to have my own Top 10 hits. My version of “A Tree in the Meadow” with the Ames Brothers scaled the charts steadily in the summer of 1948, reaching number five in the *Billboard* ranking by mid-September. A month later *Variety* named it the country’s top jukebox single. Margaret Whiting also did a cover of this English tune, but it was I who discovered and imported it. By the end of that year my Signature sales had surpassed one million records and I’d made more than seventy-five recordings under my new contract at Decca, which was cheerfully flogging me as “America’s Singing Sweetheart.”

If the columnists had their way, and they usually did, I was *everyone’s* sweetheart. Louella Parsons was notoriously relentless in her spy reports, pairing me with any male I chose to join at a restaurant or greet on the street. Among her misfires were my “romances” with orchestra maestro Skitch Henderson, with whom I’d performed at many benefits, and a Texas coffee heir named Bob Neal. Each was a lovely supper pal, nothing more.

It was safer for celebrities in New Orleans, where the free-and-easy denizens could care less about anybody’s business but their own. While I was appearing at a great old French Quarter hotel called the Montileone, Guy Madison, a hopeful actor in his late twenties who was doing a play in town, rang me directly to make reservations for my show. I had seen pictures of Guy previously; he was incredibly gorgeous, and now I found myself blushing at his flattering politeness on the phone. He brought several castmates in for my set that evening. The room was packed but I managed to wink and slink in his direction more than once. Afterward the two of us repaired to my suite for drinks—and a private performance.

Guy was a muscular former telephone lineman and Coast Guardsman who was discovered and renamed by Henry Willson, the gay talent executive who branded the identities of such macho performers as Rock Hudson, Rory Calhoun and Tab Hunter. (The industry running gag was that Willson’s next assembly-line

hunk would be “Hub Cap.”) I saw nary a hint of heterosexual uncertainty in our few hours together. Guy’s very straightness may have worked against him behind the scenes, for he was never able to snare worthwhile leading man roles on talent alone. He simply was not as capable an actor as his contemporaries: Brando was Brando, and R.J. Wagner, Paul Newman and Gregory Peck were handsome, too, but also real pros. Guy merely was sweet and model-perfect—which worked just fine for me off-screen. Our time together was as marvelous as it was fleeting.

Another would-be affair that largely escaped Louella and the rest was Richard Rodgers of Rodgers and Hammerstein, America’s most celebrated music-making team. It’s no wonder some of the biggest hits recently have been revivals of their work: No one today seems capable of writing a hummable tune. Most New York theater ditties vaporize the moment you reach the sidewalk. I mean, can anyone remember what was sung in *Les Miserables*?

I befriended Richard—I called him Dick—on the first installment of *Toast of the Town*. He was after me for many years for many things, wanting me in shows, offering feedback on my records. He was complimentary always. After listening to my album *Fools Rush In* during the summer of 1955, he wrote me a note: “I finally got myself a phonograph in the country and listened to your album. It’s really quite wonderful. It has warmth and intimacy and, best of all, awfully good musicianship. I am proud to be represented in it and I am grateful to you for letting me have it. Love, Rich.”

Dick was erudite instead of crude—a trait mirrored in his sartorial style, which was stockbroker smart. He was careful with his innuendoes, always inquiring gently as to my personal status rather than courting ego strokes. I kept our friendship platonic by concocting stories about whoever it was I was romancing. For him to bother for any length of time with a singer who wasn’t in one of his shows was evidence of his attraction. Like Ed Sullivan and the producer Stanley Kramer (*High Noon, The Caine Mutiny*), whom I dated very briefly later, Dick was substantially older and financially flush. Yet as much as I liked socializing with mature men, I was not interested in a sugar daddy or even a big brother; I had a perfectly great dad and a terrific big brother, thank you.

Nor was I looking to illuminate Broadway, although with Dick Rodgers in my corner I probably could have been a leading light. This is not to say I wasn't seeking an opportunity to stretch my abilities. Beyond my vocals, I had always been a more-than-perfunctory vaudevillian: If I had to sing standing on my head or push a peanut around with my nose to make an audience laugh, I would do it. I was ready to bag the seal tricks and take some chances.

Call it guts or plain stupidity, but I so loved the ballet music of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II's *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue* that I wrote lyrics for it. It was melodramatic girl-meets-boy-and-boy-dies piece in which I acted, sang and danced, then ended up on the floor crying over my dead lover! I thought it would be a prodigious "screen test." I asked my dad to play it on his piano beforehand to make sure I had all the notes. I was positive it was perfect.

I told Dick I had a surprise for him and performed the scene in his Manhattan office. Cueing my accompanist, I warbled, whirled and wailed, finally collapsing into a weepy, trembling heap in front of Rodgers' massive oak desk. Dick sat there wide-eyed—whether over my talent or my audacity, I was not sure, though I did think it strange his hand was poised by the phone. After a pause, he quickly applauded and thanked my accompanist. Then he helped me to my feet.

"Sweetie," he said, walking me to a wing chair, "that was really great, a stunning performance. Only I promised that if I ever granted rights to that music to be done with lyrics, I'd give the first crack to Oscar."

It was a sobering moment—at least until Dick took me out for a consolatory double scotch. He never did give anyone the lyric rights.



As if it weren't enough for me to be the country's singing sweetheart, I was also its *selling* one. My reps—high on my Chiquita and General Electric coups—continued inking lucrative endorsement deals, which I scrambled to fulfill.

Hardly a national brand-name vice went unsold by my visage between 1948 and 1949. Cigarettes and beer were considered about as detrimental to your health as, well, bananas, and hamburgers were a Yankee staple. In print ads and

radio spots, my pert, 110-pound form and wholesome voice pushed Camel Cigarettes, Rheingold Extra Dry Lager Beer and Piel's Light Beer. The latter's cloying jingle fairly jangled my sense of rhythm: *Piel's Light Beer is music to my ear; it's light and bright as a beer should be—and that's why Piel's appeals to me!* Beer was considered a boon to the war effort, and although I detested the stuff, it was heartening to know I was helping to slake the thirst of our hard-working aircraft and munitions workers.

Golden arches, be damned: I became a hamburger icon well before the vaulted yellow "M" became a symbol of capitalistic might. (The first McDonald's had only begun serving its eventual "millions and millions" in southern California in 1948). For the forty-fifth anniversary of the burger's introduction to America, I was hired by the beef industry to demonstrate for photographers the proper etiquette for eating said edible by slicing one in half. I merely feigned chewing the overcooked prop as I held it daintily between my thumb and forefinger, but the press ate it up.

My brother, while pleased that I was on a publicity roll, wasn't thrilled to see me reduced to ground chuck by the same advertising machine he once ran as an executive. It was typical of him to encourage me not to underestimate—or worse, sell out—my singing talent. Even when we were kids he was concerned about my well-being; it wasn't until adulthood that I truly appreciated his caring, even if I didn't always take his advice.

Professional guidance aside, it was rare of Marlo to play cupid. So it was a bit startling when he phoned from the *Toast of the Town* set to rave about a twentysomething gentlemen who had just costumed singer Lisa Kirk. "I never saw such beautiful clothes!" he said. "His designs are magnificent—so original and immaculate. He's a really nice young guy, too. You've got to meet him."

The fellow's name was Burton Miller. I called him and we agreed to meet at a corner coffee shop. I didn't really know what to expect, but I felt right at home with him when he walked in and introduced himself as "Burt." He was casual, unaffected—a model of conservative elegance in neat slacks and an elbow-patch sports jacket. We bonded immediately over cups of steaming joe and

an evenly split pound cake, only the reasons had nothing to do with this Pittsburgh native's dark-haired, handsome features or any romantic sparks. I told Burt my stage act needed a makeover, and I fell in love with his ideas. We forged a partnership right there.

Burt and I planned something special for my second opening at the Paramount Theater. We thought it would be an audience-wower for me to do an on-stage clothes change combined with a tap dance! My outfit was designed so that I could easily sashay behind a screen at stage left, drop my gown to reveal a leotard and continue tapping with at least one foot while Burt switched my shoes—all while the band sang “Where’s Monica?” with a hand-clapping beat. I made a deal with the drummer to cover my taps in case I missed one or two. (When I was at MGM a couple years later, I was dismayed to discover that most of the great film tap dancers had “dance-ins” who synchronized the stars’ taps on a special sound stage.) We had it down pat after two performances. The crowd just loved it.

I also dressed up my act with a number called “Never Fall in Love with a Magician,” the result of my studying with a *very* patient prestidigitator for several months. While singing the woes of a maid unlucky in romance, I pulled toy rabbits out of a high silk hat, performed card and handkerchief tricks and even turned love letters into flowers. My closing night at a gambling club in Illinois broke the audience up, literally and figuratively, when the wiseacre owner slipped a live rabbit into my hat and everyone tried to corral the rampant critter. With some strong-arming from my reps in the form of a threatened lawsuit, I forced the club to settle by making it buy new air conditioning for my parents’ Manhattan apartment. I couldn’t think of a better way to cool my own sore heels, which Burt had convinced me to shoehorn into the highest spikes possible.

Burton Miller was a miracle for my career—and for my life in general. I felt completely comfortable with him. We wanted nothing from each other but good, rollicking company and the free exchange of ideas.

Then something bizarre happened.

Burt's dad called me long-distance and offered me one million dollars to marry his son.

The elder Miller, who had made his fortune as a Steel City Buick dealer, could not accept that Burt was homosexual. Burt's mother knew and accepted her son's orientation; she also told me her husband couldn't deal with it. It was clear Mr. Miller needed some sort of reaffirmation for the benefit of his own masculinity. I guess he thought that if anyone could set Burt straight, I could—or at least knowing that his son was with me, he wouldn't have to contemplate anything less appetizing.

It would have been hilarious had it not been so pathetic.

Burt pitched a fit when I told him about his father's indecent proposal. When he calmed, he suggested we take the money and run. "We'll fly around the world and buy lots of clothes wherever we land," he enthused. "Maybe we could have a really fabulous time." I convinced him that for a global tour taken with our extravagant tastes, the money wouldn't last six months.

I loved Burt and Burt loved me. But I felt it wasn't my place to tell Mr. Miller that if he could reconcile that his son was a wonderful, vital and creative person, he wouldn't be making such a stupid offer. Besides, my track record indicated that marriages of *inconvenience* were my specialty.

I hemmed and hawed. Finally, I declined.

"I'm just not ready to get married again," I told Burt's dad. "But if there was any man in the world I *would* marry, he would be your loving, loyal son."

It was a bitter pill for Mr. Miller. Yet for me and Burt, who would become one of Hollywood's top film and TV costumers, it was the beginning of something as heavenly as wedded bliss. It was the start of a lifelong friendship.



Burton Miller was not to be my only Pittsburgh "love connection."

A good friend of mine, Jack Eigen, hosted a New York talk radio program that aired nightly from midnight to 4:00 a.m. on WMGM from the Copacabana lounge. The show had a tremendous regional audience of about five million

listeners, and all the press agents wanted to book their acts on it. Every celebrity passing through town lobbied Jack for an appearance. I myself was a frequent guest.

In late January 1949, Jack wanted to take a two-week Miami vacation with his wife and asked me to substitute for him as radio host. He felt having a woman in his chair would be a change of pace (he had nixed the idea of an experienced male temp for fear of losing his stature), and I thought it would be a great way to show that I could do more than sing and banter. My publicity already was in high gear: Paramount Pictures was just releasing *Make Mine Monica*, a film short about my life and career, and I had recently made the cover of *Parade*. I had plenty of engagements, too, including an appearance on the military radio program *Voice of the Army*. But I wasn't feeling over-stressed, so I agreed to help Jack out.

Every flack in New York swooped in when word circulated I was doing the show. Many of them owed me favors for my participation in benefits and photo shoots designed to bolster their new clients. They were eager to see me do well with the stint, and I was happy to consider, if not accommodate, any celebrity they sent my way.

It was a case of my mouth being bigger than my stomach.

Maintaining a continuous four hours of minimally substantive radio patter every night was exhausting... and terrifying. I had to be on my toes because after midnight I was competing with questions lobbed across the lounge by tipsy clubgoers. So much for figuring that all I had to do was read my guests' press biographies, ask the basics and let 'em yak!

Some visitors spouted off too much—like our so-called “Sentimental Gentleman of Swing,” Tommy Dorsey. I nearly bit my tongue clear through as he railed: “It's not enough for bebop musicians to sprout tufts of chin whiskers. It would be of more importance if they learned to play their instruments.”

Okey-dokey.

For the most part my tack worked. Until a professional athlete slid into the hot seat.

Baseball, as always, was huge. A sports non-nut, I got a little nervous when I agreed to book the game's ruling slugger, Ralph Kiner of the Pittsburgh Pirates. He was a fine-looking 28-year-old, a future Hall of Famer who was the Mark McGuire of his era. Kiner won or tied the home run race every year between 1946-52 and led the National League in batting percentage three times during his decade-long career.

Before the interview I arranged a hasty meeting with my brother-in-law, Bill Golub. "Tell me what I'm supposed to know about Ralph Kiner!" I pleaded. Bill filled me in on Kiner's Korner, the left-field area at Pittsburgh's Forbes Field where Kiner landed many of his homers, and he told me that baseball great Hank Greenberg, who had just retired, was Kiner's mentor and hero. Bill also gave me the batting average and number of home runs. I clutched a tiny crib sheet containing these details during the interview.

I never expected Kiner to be a stupid jock. But I also didn't expect him to recognize readily that I was ignorant of the sport. His attractiveness made me that much more vulnerable.

About four questions into our live, on-air chat, Kiner narrowed his eyes.

"Miss Lewis, may I ask *you* a question?"

"Go ahead," I said, more intrigued than alarmed.

"What league am I with?"

I was on the business end of a lethal Kiner swing. The guy was with the Pirates. And that's all I knew! I had a vague thought that he was in the National League—my brother-in-law had assumed I could remember at least *that*. But it wasn't on my crib sheet, which I promptly wadded and tossed over my shoulder.

Between my nagging guilt and the disarming charm of "Pittsburgh's Pride," I caved in grandly as millions of ears perked all over New York.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the listening audience, I owe you all a tremendous apology. I don't know what league Ralph Kiner is with. I don't know anything about baseball. The notes I had tucked in my hand were supplied by my brother-in-law. I admit stupidity in the subject, but I couldn't resist having Ralph

Kiner here. I owe him one, and I owe you—the *fans*—a lot of love. Thanks for your patience.”

Still on the air, my face burning from this confession, I turned to Ralph. “What can I do to make up for this?”

Kiner looked at me as if he’d hit a grand slam. He frowned momentarily, simulating deep thought.

“I have two great seats for *South Pacific* on Tuesday,” he said. “I’d like you to accompany me.”

I played right along, addressing the Copa crowd as well as the listeners. “What do you say, out there? Should I go? I owe this guy. Let me know what you think.”

The phone lines caught fire. “Go, Monica, go!” everyone encouraged.

Ralph and I became sporadic date mates. He was very different from the creative types that normally caught my fancy but not an untutored slob who couldn’t speak English. In addition to being a looker with forearms like fireplugs, he was bright and well bred. He also was enamored of talent and celebrity, and he had an unusual affinity for show business and the theater. Ralph liked all the good things in life, not just baseball. There was no lack of conversation.

Later in life, as a broadcast announcer for the New York Mets, Ralph would become somewhat notorious for his oft-quoted malapropisms (e.g., “If Casey Stengel were alive today, he’d be spinning in his grave”). But I found him to be quite intentionally humorous. His personality and frequent letters to me brimmed with wit. Having dated about 8,000 comics, I knew from funny.

Milton Berle’s jocular and Guy Madison’s sexual heat in the body of Charles Atlas: What more could a young woman ask? It was a flat-out pheromonal kick for us both.

Ralph and I enjoyed hitting the town as much as the sack. Whether sharing rum or a rumba, we never failed to have fun, and on the dance floor I was a sucker for his powerful embrace. At the height of his season in July and August, I had engagements in Chicago, Atlantic City and Minneapolis, where I also did a special summer festival radio show with Bob Hope; Ralph would fly in to meet

me between games. My schedule was such that I could attend only two Pirates match-ups—and both times my very favorite player cracked home runs.

I tried to make up for my lack of grandstand support by voting for Ralph publicly in a *Chicago Sun-Times* baseball hero contest. But I never once thought, *Oh, boy—I'm dating a ballplayer!* It wasn't anything resembling a Marilyn Monroe-Joe DiMaggio romance. The relationship fit my overall dating pattern, which was purely Whitman Sampler. Ralph Kiner was not the only thing, or person, on my mind.

The same could not be said of the press. The gossips learned that Ralph had given me a gold ballplayer figurine with the number "4" on its back—Ralph's jersey number—for my charm bracelet, and that he had treated me to a huge (and hugely expensive) bottle of imported French perfume. Both items were accurate. But Ralph bristled over a Walter Winchell tidbit suggesting he was squandering his substantial baseball earnings on gifts for me. It was not the case.

Another columnist asserted that Ralph wanted to marry me. The subject probably came up in our travels; one night, after a few drinks, Ralph may have said, "What do you think about making it legal?" It was neither a serious consideration nor even a conversation. Both of us preferred playing the field, and the ninth month of that year also would be our ninth and final inning. For no real reason other than mutual ennui, I kissed my Boy of Summer goodbye and he strode confidently back to the dugout.

Ralph was seen squiring Elizabeth Taylor in December 1949. I suspected it was his touché to my attending the World Series with an actor named Ronald Reagan two months earlier. If there was any truth to the Taylor-Kiner reports I doubt Liz would have tolerated his seasonal city-hopping. Ralph wound up marrying a tennis star named Nancy Chaffee, the first of two Kiner marriages of which I am aware. Eventually, of course, he became a sports commentator and author—and very rich.

Ironically, my marriage to Jennings Lang a few years later would find me attending virtually every home game of the Los Angeles Dodgers. I learned all the players' names and figured out how to keep a scorecard. My husband never made

a big deal of my old fling with Ralph Kiner; if anything, Jennings' knowledge of my prior lack of sportsmanship made it a source of amusement.

I chuckle, too, over how my pinch-hitting for Jack Eigen earned me a major-league trip around the bases.



Like the rest of the country, I thought television was the greatest thing since, well, radio. And thanks to my appearances on *Toast of the Town*, *The Milton Berle Show* and others, everyone thought I was made for it.

Before 1949 ended, I had two limited-run TV programs of my own on the air: *Candlelight Review*, a Liberace-style, candelabra-filled piano-and-song interlude which I co-hosted with a suave French singer named Roger Dann, and the self-descriptive *Monica Makes Music*. Since both shows were broadcast in black and white, I got away with cross-wearing my favorite twenty-pound gown—a long-sleeved dress of amber satin trimmed with fourteen-karat gold beads. It was showy enough that I could relax a bit on hair and makeup.

TV wasn't far enough along to pay well, so I refused to commit to anything long-term involving the tube. Regardless, my eye was set on the big screen: I was increasingly hungry to step up from entertaining to acting. *Argosy* magazine ran a story predicting major success for me in Hollywood. I had no reason to disbelieve it. The problem was I had to get there!

I started plotting my escape from New York. I was spurred in part by a scary personal crisis: My father had just suffered a massive heart attack. It was the first time anyone in my family was seriously ill. I was very worried for his health, convinced the city's killer pace and cold weather were to blame. I canceled every appearance requiring out-of-town travel to assist my mother with Dad's recovery. It was a much-needed period of extra-closeness for all.

As my father improved, I resumed my full work schedule. But the dearth of studio talent scouts in the Big Apple, and on the Eastern Seaboard at large, meant that some of my best work was going unnoticed. Frustrated, I hired Henry Rogers, the premier publicity man to the stars, whom I sweet-talked down to \$500

a month—one-quarter his normal client fee. I then had an urgent meeting with MCA's west coast chief, Lew Wasserman, who was passing through on business.

Lew swiveled in a high tufted-leather chair as I sat before him, his eyes swimming large behind thick glasses. (It would be another couple decades before he adopted his trademark outsize power goggles.) I wondered aloud why the agency was not booking me in Los Angeles.

"Singing is my calling card," I said. "I just can't go out there and say, 'Here I am. Now put me in movies.' I've got to show them."

Lew rolled a gold pen on the desk blotter. "You're absolutely right," he said. "We should have done this a long time ago."

And I should have forced the issue much sooner. Doris Day had gone directly from living in a trailer park to making movies on the coast. Certainly, from my current level of experience and exposure, a film contract looked like a snap. A studio deal—not merely a motion picture guest shot—would enable me to relocate my family to the warm California sunshine, where my father could recuperate more comfortably and my career might flourish.

Also fueling my impetus was an affair I had just ended with Kirk Douglas. He was hot off the boxing saga *Champion*. And he was... *hot*. When any of the big male movie stars flew to New York, their press agents scrambled to arrange the highest-profile arm jewelry. I'd brace myself for the call: "Could I take you to dinner? I heard your show was wonderful..." Blah, blah, blah. I knew these men, like many I encountered, were in positions of power I could exploit. But I also had to wake up with myself in the morning.

Kirk was still married but separated from his wife, Diana, who would later divorce him. His marital status was irrelevant to our mutual media wrangler, Henry Rogers. Although I was cowed, Henry persisted, saying it would just be a friendly, harmless introduction. I gave in.

For such a young, up-and-coming actor, Kirk had commanding talent, manners, good humor and impeccable taste in clothing and food. He also had a mammoth ego—who in show business didn't? But he had an intellect and inquisitiveness that superceded self-love. Kirk was looking and searching and

probing and thinking, as was I: We were trying to figure out what was going on in the world, not just what our next gig would be. The Big Picture would dominate our respective marquees later in life, when I started politicking actively and Kirk wrote books and became a patron of the arts, donating generously to Los Angeles and its cultural institutions.

At that time, being not much older than kids, we saw our intersection as a *Why not?* situation. Kirk and I were two people in lust. Neither of us had any illusions of developing a relationship; a divorce wasn't yet in the wings for Kirk. On the other hand we did not just say hello and pounce on the mattress. We behaved socially—going to plays, having dinner, doing the town.

Preliminaries be damned, it boiled down to doing each other.

Kirk exhibited breathtaking sexual prowess. His took pride in his technique, moving in ways that were downright calisthenic. His idea of chin-ups involved some prolonged, intensely creative and altogether wondrous applications of that famous cleft. I never knew stubble burn could be such a valentine.

Chiseled charms notwithstanding, Kirk hooked me with a declaration over drinks one evening at the 21 Club.

“Talented people,” he said, clasping my hand, “are the only true aristocracy.”

This dovetailed with my own theory of talent, which I consider a miracle of the gene pool. You can teach music, but you can't teach someone to be Pavarotti or Placido Domingo or Frank Sinatra. You can teach algebra and medicine, but you can't teach someone to be Einstein or Jonas Salk. Everyone is born with a predisposition toward some kind of talent; when schooling or happenstance uncovers it, those individuals who protect and strive to improve it are the ones who deserve to reach the top.

I was determined to make the very best of mine.



“Start packing your bags, darlin’. You’re flying to Hollywood.”

Lew Wasserman's phone message arrived on the tail of a terse Western Union telegram from Ed Sullivan: "Delighted to inform you that you are nominated for a Radio & Television Academy Award. Dinner at Waldorf-Astoria March 21. All proceeds to N.Y. Heart Fund."

March 1950 had come in like a lion indeed. I was awash in a spring thaw of exceptionally good fortune! The Academy of Radio and Television Best Arts and Sciences had decided to honor me along with Dinah Shore and Jo Stafford as one of the year's top vocalists. It was the closest thing we had to the Grammy Awards in those days, and earning the official recognition of my peers was just the confidence-stoking I needed for my long-awaited trip west.

My Los Angeles debut was set for April at the Mocambo, the famous club on the Sunset Strip. It was one of the two biggest venues in the city, the other being *Ciro's*, and it had the hottest band anywhere. Owner Charlie Morrison was known for his adventurous bookings; he had seen me perform on *Toast of the Town* and signed me to a two-week engagement. I broke the bank and went first-class all the way, lodging at the ultra-swank Beverly Hills Hotel—also known as the "Pink Palace." True to its sobriquet, the inn's spa treatments, dotting twenty-four-hour room service, chic clothiers and star-sprinkled Polo Lounge would tickle me that healthy color the entire time.

The fanfare started the moment my plane touched the tarmac, with the usual phalanx of photographers crowding the hatch for the grand debarkation. True to my latest press-appointed title, "Miss Sweater Girl of New York," I realigned my posture up and out as I descended the stairway in a tight red turtleneck. My general buoyancy over this most important arrival made me drop my guard, and I found myself proposing some kind of bosom "showdown" with the local starlets, whom I suggested were inclined to habitual augmentation.

"Frequently they're more false than real-ee," I asserted, baring my teeth in a triumphant smile. I continued waving as jaws hit the ground all around me.

I wanted to crawl under the rug when the quote made the newspapers the next morning. But it had been a long flight and my confidence was soaring. Who could blame me for a little, er, breast-beating?

Before the Mocambo gig I spent a few days immersing myself in the L.A. club scene. It was gratifying that people recognized me wherever I went; my newness in town, combined with the media coverage, had autograph seekers waving record jackets, napkins, torn print ads bearing my image and at least one pair of boxer shorts. Frank Sinatra, Milton Berle and Dean Martin were among the many well-wishers who sent flowers and gift baskets to my hotel suite. I found myself wondering where Hollywood had been all my life.

Wally Cox, the comedy half of my Mocambo marquee, led the welcoming committee. Wally was funny and brilliant; two years later he would hit it huge in the live TV sitcom *Mr. Peepers* as the eponymous nerd-cum-science teacher. He also was a strange little fellow, totally off the wall. If the comic Andy Kaufman later would come to be known as the man on the moon, well, Wally had reached Mars decades earlier.

Wally and I got along fine. He adored me, but I couldn't put a finger on his sexuality—nor did I particularly want to. I knew he was friendly with Marlon Brando and that they shared custody of a pet monkey. Or something.

Wally himself evidenced a certain simian weirdness one night while visiting my suite, breathlessly detailing a plan to scale and “christen” the famous Hollywood sign on Mt. Olympus.

“This town thinks I have no balls,” he said, gesticulating spastically as he paced. “I’ll give ’em balls! I’m going to climb that goddamn hill and micturate all over that fucking ‘H.’ They’ll see my big balls for miles around!”

Uh-huh... all right.

Regrettably, Wally nearly caused me to piss away my own career on opening night.

I was a jumble of nerves before the performance. Charlie Morrison strutted about like a drill sergeant, barking at the lighting crew, pinching the hostess's posterior and generally raising hell for the hell of it. He was all compliments when he stuck his head in my dressing room. I was seated at my makeup table, combing back a few wayward blond strands but otherwise ready to go in my off-the-shoulder, emerald satin décolleté gown.

“You’re gonna floor ’em, kid.”

I forced a smile at Charlie’s reflection in the mirror. Cigarette smoke from the thrumming main room was wafting backstage. My stomach roiled, and I was starting to cramp. Wally noticed my discomfort as I tottered to the rest room. A few moments later, he came to my dressing room door with a tiny pill and a glass of Coke.

“Take this, it’ll calm your stomach,” he said.

I looked at the pill. “What is it?”

“It’s a stomach-calmer.”

“What kind?”

“The kind that calms your stomach.”

“Oh.”

I was on in five minutes, so I dropped the impromptu inquest and washed the capsule down. I have only the haziest recollection of what happened afterward.

The pill I had taken in desperate haste was Phenobarbital. It is a muscle relaxant—one of the earliest drugs developed for seizure patients. As someone who had ingested perhaps two aspirins in her entire young life, it was a terrible mistake for me to take such a powerful drug before stepping in front of the curtain.

You’re gonna floor ’em, kid.

On stage my judgment was clouded, my movements leaden. Contrary to my normal persona, I avoided eye contact with the audience and focused vaguely on the rear of the room, where the silhouettes of potted indoor palm trees were swaying impossibly in a nonexistent breeze. By the time I took my final bow I could barely stand upright. The dizziness was overwhelming.

I had no idea how well I performed that night. I had no idea how I *performed*. But I knew it could not have been good.

Sheila Graham, the big-time entertainment columnist who was F. Scott Fitzgerald’s lover, delivered her telltale review the next day. “We were very disappointed about last night’s performance at the opening of Monica Lewis, who

was touted as being so wonderful,” she wrote. “I have loved her records, but something was amiss—except her hair was gorgeous, and she took very nice court bows.”

It was crushing. But I wasn’t the only “blond bombshell” detonated in the columns. Thanks to the Phenobarbital, I missed not only my own worst performance but another sorry drama which unfolded at the Mocambo that evening.

As usual, the gossips had been tracking my every move. I was friendly with a wealthy Chicagoan named Ted Briskin, the head of Revere Camera—the company for which I had spent an entire year co-starring on *The Revere Camera Hour* family radio program. We dined out together a couple times but it never was more than a dalliance. Ted had just divorced Betty Hutton, one of the country’s best vocal stylists, who was enjoying a ten-year head start on me as an actress (*Annie Get Your Gun*, *The Greatest Show on Earth*). Betty reportedly was furious that I had been seen with Ted. She determined that she would intimidate me at the club by seating herself by the stage with several lady friends.

Their effort was in vain. Ted was not in attendance that evening, and any harsh glare aimed in my direction was lost in that of the spotlight, which in my stuporous state had seemed as bright as the sun.

In any event, I was so miserable over blowing my big opening that I called my mother in New York and cried.

“Oh, don’t fret over it, dear,” she reassured. “You’ll be great tonight!”

Mom was right. My second night at the Mocambo, with the medication expunged from my system, was nothing short of magical. Joe Pasternak, the big MGM-based producer who’d discovered Judy Garland, was in the audience. I didn’t learn of his presence until he came backstage to introduce himself and congratulate me on the show.

The following morning brought a dream-come-true call from Lew Wasserman: “You’ll have to let someone else take Manhattan. MGM wants to keep you here for a screen test.”



My remaining play dates at the Mocambo sold out, thanks to word of mouth and some great follow-up reviews. Wally Cox was hitting his stride, too: Thankfully there were no reports of any peculiar, bespectacled men caught exposing themselves from on high.

Preparations for the screen test would require me to remain in L.A. four weeks beyond my club run. Feeling like a major Hollywood star already, I retained my \$80-a-night suite at the Beverly Hills Hotel. The room, plus my newfound habits of sipping sidecars in the Polo Lounge and loitering in the pricey boutiques, all but exhausted the money I had managed to save. But I didn't care. It was the vacation I never had—an indulgent trade-off for the greater riches I was certain were around the corner.

There would be additional sacrifice, however, en route to the studio's Culver City lot. Immediately, MGM's legendary drama coach, Lillian Burns—a homely, domineering stub of a woman who stood about chin-high to my five-foot-three-inch height—advised me that the camera adds weight and I should have a dehydration shot to shed five pounds. Leery of dealing with the studio's in-house M.D., I called a physician recommended by my brother. The doctor advised me there was nothing to worry about it, other than that the treatment would cause me to spend forty-eight hours in the bathroom and become very thirsty.

I had the shot, losing two pounds of water in as many days. Next, there were repeated cab trips to the lot (only established stars were granted studio limousine service) for makeup tests and a new coiffure by hairdresser extraordinaire Sidney Guilaroff. Sidney was absolutely darling. We became friends on the spot.

Despite the build-up, my black-and-white screen test was a relatively simple affair directed by Joe Pasternak. I wore a black off-the-shoulder crepe dress. The set we used was barren save for a rotating stool and a piano replete with studio accompanist. I spoke my name and sang a song as instructed. For the close-ups, I perched on the stool—turning left, spinning right and smiling all the

way. As a favor to my brother, Kathryn Grayson, a coloratura soprano and MGM contractee (*Ziegfeld Follies*, *Show Boat*) who was married to my old *Chesterfield* co-host Johnny Johnston, was on hand to offer suggestions and moral support.

The test turned out beautifully. No other studio knew how to package people like MGM. They made you look smashing. It was no wonder Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney became major stars growing up there. Put simply, anyone who worked at MGM and didn't learn every secret of presentation was a schmuck.

The studio was impressed enough by my screen test to offer a two-year contract. At last, I felt that doors large enough to accommodate my biggest dreams were opening.

There was one major problem: MCA forbade me to sign the MGM agreement.

The deal called for \$500 a week—minus commissions, taxes and Screen Actors Guild dues. That was a fraction of the \$4,000-5,000 I was accustomed to earning weekly. Moreover, the contract would be all-inclusive. In addition to incorporating a twelve-week paid hiatus during which I could not make public appearances unless sanctioned by the studio, I would be forced to abandon Decca for MGM Records.

My reps deemed the terms terrible, the compensation utterly beneath me. MCA wanted to stall for a richer, less restrictive one- or two-picture deal. But I was impulsive. I wanted to return to New York with a big contract. After much arguing, I ditched MCA and signed with MGM through an L.A.-based agent named Paul Small, who, it turned out was married to the sister of Dore Schary, the studio's chief of production. I didn't know I was putting myself in a very inferior position. Rather than a seasoned, national-level entertainment professional, I was behaving like a naïf fresh off the bus!

Everyone I knew had sided with MCA's caution except Leon and Jessie Lewis, who, as usual, supported my wishes. "Monica has worked so hard," my father said. "This is a new experience for her. Let her express herself." Neither of my parents, whom by this time I was partly supporting financially while my

brother and sister raised their own families, was in love with the idea of relocating to California. I appealed to their sense of adventure and convinced them that it would be fun—and especially good for Daddy’s health.

By the first of June, the three of us were settling into our new home in the Sunset Plaza Apartments above the Strip. It was a small but lovely one-bedroom flat (I took the fold-out couch in the living room) which, for \$180 a month, included access to tennis courts and a pool. The view from our terrace encompassed the Hollywood Hills and a striking Frank Lloyd Wright house occupied by Wright’s granddaughter, Anne Baxter, who was about my age and currently lighting up the screen opposite Bette Davis in *All About Eve*.

The traffic in Los Angeles was a trickle compared to today. Yet for me, having grown up New York subways and cabs, learning to drive was daunting. Once I obtained my license it took me a couple months to work up the nerve to maneuver my hotter-than-hot mint-green Pontiac convertible beyond the two or three roads I had to take to Culver City and back. I enjoyed an unprecedented sense of control over my life as I grew more comfortable in the driver’s seat.

Careerwise, I still wasn’t completely behind the wheel.

At the behest of Lillian Burns, Sidney Guilaroff had shortened my hair and darkened it from platinum to tawny to make me look like Lana Turner, MGM’s most bankable blond. Sidney did it reluctantly, confiding to me that MGM would be smart to accentuate my natural attributes.

“They don’t yet know what they have with you, dear,” he whispered, wielding his scissors deftly as I reclined in the plush styling chair in his studio salon. “Hopefully they won’t obscure a good thing. If they left you in my charge they sure wouldn’t.”

Within a few weeks I would realize he wasn’t just being sweet.



Ronald Reagan was one of my greatest loves. He was a constant in my life through several affairs and, beyond my family, my sturdiest bridge between New York and Los Angeles. There was nothing at all the matter with this towering

Illinois native and former radio announcer—almost. He was handsome, endearing, gentlemanly, polished... and stubbornly low-voltage.

I first met Ronnie in Manhattan during the fall of 1948 through some very good friends, Sonny Werblin and his wife, Leah Rae. Sonny was a key force at MCA before it moved into the picture business—he oversaw the company’s east coast talent operations while Jules Stein and Lew Wasserman ran the west coast. (Eventually Sonny would head up Madison Square Garden and purchase the New York Jets football team). He thought Ronnie, who had just been divorced from Jane Wyman, would make a fine match for me and arranged for the four of us to have dinner at the 21 Club.

The chemistry was not immediate. At first I mistook Ronnie’s politeness for stiffness, even if he did look stunning in a white polo coat. But the more he spoke, the more I began to simmer, and by the end of the evening I was completely taken with his manners, grooming and confidence. He was at a low ebb in Hollywood, several years removed from his star peak in movies like *Knute Rockne*, *All American* and *Kings Row*. Yet his screen history was about the furthest thing from my mind at the moment, riveted as I was by the stellar Ronald Reagan performance unspooling before me.

“The pleasure has been all mine, Miss Lewis,” Ronnie said, kissing my hand when it came time to depart. I couldn’t help but giggle when I caught the Werblins exchanging satisfied glances.

Ronnie and I spoke on the phone the following evening, and over the next several weeks, the two of us returned to the 21 Club and hopped between all the other hot night spots. The hottest spot proved to be Ronnie’s room at the Sherry Netherland, where we made love on our third date. The next day, enough flowers arrived for me at my parents’ apartment to throw a funeral! Despite Ronnie’s nickname, “Dutch treat” was not in the Reagan lexicon. He preferred the most traditional of male-female gestures. But then he generally was a no-nonsense guy—the kind who preferred splitting wood over whacking tennis balls to relieve tension.

Unfortunately, he was preparing to leave for London in December to shoot the screen version of playwright John Patrick's war drama *The Hasty Heart*, which would turn out to be one of Ronnie's very best films. But for the better part of a year he maintained a romantic pilot light between us via thoughtful, moving letters and phone calls; not a week would pass without one or the other. Although we couldn't be together, the communications strengthened our bond in ways that purely physical contact could not. It was a true meeting of hearts and minds. I would value that connection for as long as I knew him.

We tried to pick up where we left off after Ronnie returned to the States, but the usual scheduling conflicts—my touring tethered me to the eastern half of the country, while his film work and duties as president of the Screen Actors Guild kept him mostly in Hollywood—made sexual fidelity impossible, and both of us dated others. We made up for it after I moved to Los Angeles. Our relationship also became a working one when MGM's vice president and general manager, Louis B. Mayer wanted me to sing and be seen at different functions, especially Democratic fundraisers. Ronnie, conservative as he may have been in most regards, was ideologically liberal at the time and wrote the speeches I made at these events. They were never less than rousing.

Ronnie's generosity extended to my parents, whom he lavished with an expensive sterling silver bar set and various trinkets from Tiffany. It was reported widely that Ronnie had presented me his medal of St. Genesius, the patron saint of actors. Actually, he had a special piece made expressly for me by Billy Ruser, a well-known Los Angeles jewelry designer. The medal was about two inches across, made of solid, beautifully hand-engraved 14-carat gold. It was magnificent. And it must have cost a fortune.

While my parents adored Ronnie, many of my friends were not convinced our relationship would work. One skeptic was Cy Howard, a pal of mine and a successful comedy writer (*My Friend Irma*) who never missed an opportunity to propose marriage to me. He was very funny guy, a real maniac and a congenial cynic. But as with one of his major employers, Jerry Lewis, a little of his personality went a long way.

Cy tossed in his two cents after spotting me with Ronnie at Chasen's.

"Was he whispering to you or nibbling on your ear?"

"What are you talking about?" I said.

"Do you really like this guy?"

"Yes. So?"

"Well, don't ask him what time it is. He'll explain how watches are made."

Cy's smart-assery did circumscribe a nagging dilemma: As wonderful a human being he was, Ronnie wasn't what I considered hip or cutting-edge. He was neither a rapier wit nor a Method actor. Oh, he could discourse endlessly on SAG politics—there was plenty of legitimate debate over performers' rights and their need to be free agents. But spontaneity and creativity were real chores for him outside that subjective arena.

I was steeped in avant-garde jazz; Ronnie was strictly ballroom.

Earlier, this had become a problem for Jane Wyman. After their initial passion wore off, Ronnie couldn't keep pace with his wife personally or professionally. Jane was an *actress*—the prototype of who gets to the mirror first. She wasn't so terribly concerned with the politics of the nation as with those of the studio. Jane, not unlike myself, had had a checkered past with men: She saw in Ronald Reagan a safe haven—a handsome, young, healthy, moral man. At some point she became bored with his straightness and longed for a more kinky life.

Ronnie told me his rift with Jane had much to do with her sense of unfulfillment. He held out hope that she would give him a second chance, but that was unlikely since he and I had been linked in the press.

There was, to be certain, no love lost between me and Jane Wyman. One day in late 1950, I was having lunch with Cy Howard at Chasen's and ran into Jane in the ladies' room. She was touching up her makeup, eyeing me in the mirror as I struggled to re-zip my dress.

"The way to do that is to lie down flat on your back," she said, snapping her compact. "You're good at that."

I was shocked beyond response as she stalked out. I had heard every profanity in the book but had never been attacked outright by such a lousy personal remark. I felt wounded, and evidently looked it, when I returned to the table.

“What’s the matter with you?” Cy said.

“Jane Wyman. She just blasted me in the powder room.”

“Oh, don’t worry about Jane,” he said, nursing his scotch. “She snores and doesn’t suck.”

I laughed so hard my dismay evaporated instantly. Sweet as Cy could be, he also was frightfully sheet-smart—thanks no doubt to his involvement in a Heidi Fleiss-type “little black book” scandal that took him years to live down.

I learned more about Ms. Wyman after I wed Jennings, who had struck up a friendship with Jane during his first marriage and helped her find work. Jennings confirmed that Jane could be catty and envious, and that she never liked women who were younger than she. Now that I was Jennings’ wife and Jane was enjoying the success of her TV anthology series, *The Jane Wyman Show* (formerly known as *Fireside Theatre*), I assumed bygones would be bygones.

Alas, not long after I gave birth to my son, Rocky, in January 1958, I had another rude Wyman awakening. It happened following a dinner Jennings and I shared with Jane and her latest beau at the Beverly Hills Hotel.

“You know, Jane,” I said, as we waited in the porte cochere for our men to return from the rest room, “now that my baby’s been born and I have some time, if there’s ever some small role you need to fill on the show, I’d love to come down and do it.”

Jane twisted her mouth. “I’ll have to see what’s available,” she said, waving at one of the valets and looking everywhere but at me. “There may be a maid’s part where you’d just walk in with a tray and say, ‘Here’s your coffee’ or something.”

Meeeeooooowwww.

My husband and Cy Howard were right. Once a bitch, always a bitch.



From a basic female standpoint, I can understand Jane Wyman's spitefulness. After all, I received the gratification Ronald Reagan could not or would not give her in their final years together. It must have been a thorn for her.

For me, it was an erotic horn of plenty.

If Ronnie was a model of charm and urbanity in public, he was Sexual Exhibit "A" behind closed doors. Regarding his dissolved marriage a highly personal failure, he obviously had embarked upon an SDI—a Sensual Development Initiative—after Jane left him. Ronnie was not a carnal prude, nor was he a minute man. He was patient and painstakingly adept in bed—very skilled, very aware and thoroughly in tune with the cadence of pleasure. It was the most satisfying off-stage duet I ever had outside marriage.

And in the bedroom was the only place he would relax his predictably rigid decorum. Following one monumental lovemaking session, Ronnie chuckled for a good hour when I dubbed him "The Amazing Doctor Clitterhouse"—the name of a 1938 "B" crime movie which featured his formidable oral talent in a voiceover role.

Inevitably, there had to be a day of reckoning. Ronnie was never a big swinger; he wanted desperately to have a wife. I appreciated everything he had and all that he offered, weighing carefully the possibility of marriage. But I was looking for a combination of danger, great humor and God knows what in an eternal partner. It was not that Ronnie was hopelessly staid; he usually got all the jokes. And there was no lack of physical sparks. Yet for me, to borrow a term for which he'd become universally famous, it wasn't quite "Star Wars."

Ronnie's path took many surprising turns after we diverged. He switched from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party very openly. At one point, he even wanted to join the Communist Party in Hollywood because all the intellectuals were going that way; the group nixed his wish, viewing his political vacillating the mark of a flake. If anything, Ronnie was anti-clique. He had a

pronounced coolness: I never saw him hanging out with any buddies. He was very much one-on-one.

As were most of us who had spent our formative adult years in the cloistered realm of show business, Ronnie was searching—looking for a new direction in life and work. MCA had struggled to get him good acting roles, unable to do much better than the silly 1951 chimpanzee comedy *Bedtime for Bonzo*. Lew Wasserman, along with my future husband, Jennings Lang, and the rest of the top brass, finally engineered his long-running job as host—beginning in 1954—of CBS’s *General Electric Theater*. Then they started sending him on promotional speaking tours for MCA. Those speeches brought him great public acclaim, and he relished the adulation. No one, including Ronnie himself, could have known those cheers were the birth wails of a new chapter in world history.

Ronald Reagan’s ultimate role in politics was absolutely Academy Award-caliber. He was vital and vigorous within his own parameters, and I admired his determination. When he ran for governor of California in 1967, and again in 1980 when he campaigned successfully for President, the Democratic National Committee—of which Jennings and I were mammoth supporters—asked me if I would dish any dirt. I gave an emphatic “No!” There are those who were always a little over-anxious to smear Ronnie; even though he wasn’t my choice for President, I have nothing but good things to say about his character. I disagreed strongly with some of his policies; whether he himself ever fully believed in everything he did, we’ll never know. The public, of course, loved him enough to vote for him twice.

I never had any particular opinion of Nancy Davis, who, like I, had been under contract to MGM in the 1950s. She wanted Ronnie, and she got him. God bless her. She was an asset to her husband always—shaping him, making him happy. Nancy was a tough broad, and she remains so today. Despite the poor relationship they have had with their children, the Reagans enjoyed some fabulously exciting and revolutionary times during their two terms in Washington. My sympathy goes out to her for the pain she has endured in recent years.

The last time I heard from Ronnie was the week before he married Nancy in 1952. He called me at home from our favorite booth at Ciro's.

"Would you have a drink with me for old times' sake?" he said.

"I don't think it would be helpful," I replied.

"I'd just like to see you again before—"

I knew in my heart he was not angling for a final sexual fling. Ronnie truly just wanted to have one last toast—for moral support's sake—before he took what he knew would be his resolute plunge.

"You know, honey, I really think it's not a good idea," I said, failing to choke back three years' worth of feelings. "I will always cherish what we had. Always I will. I wish you all the happiness in the world."

Often I have been asked if I regretted my decision to part with Ronald Reagan. The answer: I do not. Fate works in mysterious ways, and I tend not to live life attempting to second-guess its inscrutable design. If it weren't for the Presidential Seal, Ronnie would be just another page in my memory, albeit one of legal-pad length. Yet I cannot escape that I nearly married a monolith which shifted its intellectual axis, though never its moral foundation—and managed to plant itself for eight years in the White House.