

Dancing on the  
Head of a Pin

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*...if we can see the path laid out for us, there is a good chance it is not our path; it is probably someone else's we have substituted for our own. Our own path must be deciphered every step of the way.*

—David Whyte, *The Heart Aroused*

## PREFACE

In one of my earliest memories, I am five years old. My father is entertaining a group of his business associates when I scramble up on the tabletop. Capturing everyone's attention, in my clearest little child voice I give a rousing rendition of "I'm a Little Teapot" complete with interpretive movements. At the last line, "just tip me over and pour me out," I lean over in an exaggerated fashion, pour out the tea and take a bow. Everyone claps, and in that moment I am whole, good enough.

I don't know if it was that experience that cemented my passion for acting. I do know that for the first part of my life it was my driving force— that thing which for me was like air.

The other constant in my life was my religion. I was raised in a first-generation Mormon family in Virginia. The path for me was clearly laid out: follow the leaders, they know best. Faithfulness in the only true religion on earth was the way to happiness.

The path started to unravel when I felt I had to give up one for the other.

Time would prove I gave up the wrong one.

# ONE

## Tempest in a Teapot

I do my own thing, march to the beat of my own drummer, rail against the norm, laugh in the face of convention, except when it really matters.

During my last year of high school in 1973, I spent a good deal of time researching liberal arts colleges; I was going to study drama and be a major player on the theatrical scene. I had no desire to be a movie star. Los Angeles had no appeal for me. I was a purist and I was going to conquer Broadway! I was an artist; the screen was for pikers who could not sustain characterization for two hours. I was destined for greatness.

One night at dinner during my senior year, I told my parents of my plans. "I got an application for college today," I announced proudly.

I had taken the initiative to write to some liberal arts colleges in New England and request information. I dug in the pocket of the ankle-length jeans skirt that was my uniform. I had made it from a pair of painter pants and patches sewn together. I fished out the folded brochure and handed it across the table to my mother. My choice was a small, expensive school in Vermont with a well-respected theater program.

Without even glancing at the brochure, she placed it on the table and looked at my dad and then at me. "Honey, your father and I will pay your tuition at a church school, either BYU or Ricks," she said evenly.

"But I don't want to go to school out West. I want to go to college in the East and then move to New York," I countered. I had it all figured out.

Momma sighed in exasperation. "Well, Suzanne went to Ricks and she says it's a great school."

"Maybe for Suzanne, but she doesn't want to be an actress." I

said about my older sister as I pointed at the brochure that I had been carrying around waiting for just the right moment to show my parents how excited I was to go there. “That school has a great reputation for turning out real talent.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Pamela Sue, you can’t possibly think you can make a living as an actress,” Momma said, with undisguised irritation. “Don’t be so naïve. Surely you don’t want to starve. You can go to either of the church schools and continue to try out for your little plays while getting a degree in a career that you can actually support yourself in.”

My little plays? “I don’t want a degree in anything else—I want to major in theater.” I shifted in my seat. “Daddy, what do you think? Look at the brochure.” My father went to church, but he didn’t believe in it as fervently as my mother. Surely he could see that there was life outside of the confines of this religion.

He picked up the brochure and gave it a cursory once-over. “It looks fine, honey, but your mother’s pretty set on you going to a church school. I don’t see why it is such a problem.”

Of course, he didn’t see. Neither did my mother. They indulged my acting; they came to my plays. They sent me flowers on opening night. But they both saw it as a hobby, like woodworking. What they failed to see was that for me it was my life’s blood.

“Please, I’ll die if you send me out West,” I said. I had a penchant for hyperbole that served me well as an actress, but wasn’t really helping me make my case here. “Just think about it.”

“That is not necessary, your father and I have discussed it and our decision is made. We will support you at either BYU or Ricks, nowhere else.”

I looked at Daddy and started to speak. “If you’ll just...” He raised his hand and cut me off with his stock phrase, “No more arguing. That’s final.”

I threw down my napkin. “May I be excused? I’m not hungry.” I stormed to my room and flopped down on my bed and cried tears of frustration. I had hoped my father would come to my aid. I knew it didn’t matter to him if I went to a church school or not. But it mattered very much to my mother, and I should have known he would stand with her.

My mother had been a twenty-seven-year-old mother of three young daughters when two nineteen-year-old Mormon missionaries showed up at her door. Having been abandoned by her mother as a small child and left with her abusive, alcoholic father, the church's zero tolerance for alcohol and the stance that her family was meant to be an eternal unit must have appealed to her. I know it did. She told me so many times.

I had cut my teeth on the painful stories of her youth. She would talk about how awful her childhood was, and then how much better her life had become once she joined the "one true Church." Her childhood was spent being shuffled from one aunt to the next, and then back to her drunken father. When the missionaries threw out the lifeline of rules for a stable family, she clung to it with both hands.

We attended church every Sunday for three hours with various activities thrown in throughout the week. When I became a teenager and started going out on Saturday nights, I did not want to get up for church in the morning. She would storm into my room with her Sunday morning wake-up call and announce, "When Saturday night interferes with Sunday morning, you cut out Saturday night." I would get up and dutifully trudge off to church in order to still be allowed my Saturday nights.

Daddy had joined the church about ten years after my mother—not out of a burning desire to be righteous, mostly just to keep peace in the family and present a united front. He had been raised Southern Baptist and loved the hellfire and brimstone-type preaching and gospel hymns of his youth. But he was baptized in a member's swimming pool, completely and totally immersed, in keeping with the Mormon dictates for baptism, despite his almost pathological fear of water. His faith was as tepid as the pool water on that day, but he sincerely wanted to please my mother.

I adored my father and wanted his love and approval. As a little girl, I had idolized him and looked for any opportunity to spend time with him. He worked long hours and when he was home, he relaxed by watching sports. So I learned to love sports.

The great love of my father's life, other than my mother, whom he adored, was baseball. Daddy was a natural athlete, and in high school he had been captain of the football, basketball, and baseball

teams. My mother was captain of the cheerleading squad. They began dating when she was thirteen and he was sixteen. After high school, Daddy was offered a full four-year baseball scholarship to Duke University in his home state of North Carolina. In 1948 he was also offered a contract with the then-New York Giants baseball team to play for their minor league team. He opted for the contract with the Giants but a year later had to quit because of a degenerative hip disease. The scholarship was no longer available because he couldn't compete. Daddy didn't ever really talk about it. It was fun, it ended, move on. He was very pragmatic and stoic. He didn't make excuses and he didn't want to hear them. If you made your bed, you lay in it. Period. End of story. And once his mind was made up, he would brook no complaint.

I felt betrayed by him. He had sided with my mother. He hadn't even tried to understand me or my point of view. As I lay there, my choices swam in my head. Fine, I thought, I will just pay my own way. But even in my disappointment, I knew I wouldn't.

Instead, I thought of my parental-approved options. Brigham Young University was a four-year school in Provo, Utah, and at the time had an enrollment of 25,000. Ricks College was a junior college in Rexburg, Idaho, a town that hardly registered on the map. I hadn't exactly been a stellar student. It had taken me three years to pass Algebra 1 and that was only with a charitable D and a teacher who never wanted to see me again. I didn't care. I wouldn't need to know what X represented in order to write my acceptance speech for the multiple Tony awards I would win.

Obviously I wasn't going to BYU. They could pick and choose, and since I had barely achieved a 2.0 GPA, they weren't going to choose me. So if I were going to a church-sponsored school, it would be Ricks.

It wasn't what I wanted, but I wouldn't put up a fight. In the end, I knew I wasn't going to pay my *own* tuition! That would require working, which I seemed to have an aversion to. Well, not a real aversion. I was just not expected to get a job. If I wanted something, I asked my parents. And if they said no, I began a campaign of needling and whining until they would give in just to shut me up. That annoying personality trait combined with their generation's post-depression mentality of my-child-will-have-everything-I-never-had assured me of

usually getting my way. For my sixteenth birthday I got a little red Fiat and I had a credit card for gas. I was spoiled. I was also lazy. My mother periodically tried to convince me to get off the couch, step away from the refrigerator and give back to the community. The one time I did led to the dubious distinction of being fired from volunteer work.