
**CONFESSIONS
OF A
CORPORATE SLUT**

PROLOGUE

Over the course of my sixteen-year marriage, I'd entertained thousands, hosted hundreds of dinner parties, kissed countless asses, brokered untold deals and colluded with dozens of employees to assure the growth of my husband's company. But the day my marriage ended only my ex-husband, our attorneys and I, bore witness to the death of this corporate wife. The settlement had been negotiated out of court and our final meeting was a mere formality required by law. My maiden name restored, my severance package finalized, I was moving to Florida to begin a new life at age fifty. I had paid a high price in terms of pride and self-esteem, and my recompense was less money per year than I would have earned had I not left my own career to better my husband's.

I was sitting alone in my car in the garage under the Milwaukee County Courthouse, my head against the headrest, seemingly glued there. My arms, wrists bent backward as my fingers grazed the leather of the steering wheel, weighed a hundred pounds each. My legs felt like cement pilings driven deep into the ground. I was convinced the level of Lake Michigan had

risen at least an inch from the volume of tears I had shed in the last fifteen months—tears of anger, frustration, sadness, madness, gladness, and humiliation with some triumph mixed in, too. Today my eyes were dry. My eyelids, suddenly heavy, involuntarily closed and images started rolling through my head like a bad 16 mm movie reel.

There I was serving dinner to ten company executives while convincing a desirable job candidate that he would be better appreciated and encouraged to grow at my husband's company. After dessert, he accepted the offer.

I was organizing a luncheon for potential customers and then planning a welcome party for the new employee and his wife. Secretly meeting with the executive vice-president, I was showing him a new approach to gain approval from the CEO—my husband—for a project that had previously been rejected.

I was shocked to hear my own laughter reverberate around the car, a repetitive echo bouncing from surface to surface like a ricocheted bullet. Could my life really have become such an appalling cliché? I had carefully crafted and culled my uniqueness from a very early age. Exactly when and how did "unique" sour like outdated milk and curdle into "cliché?" My laughter, changing key, took on a slightly maniacal pitch. What the fuck? How had I let this happen?

That very moment, I reluctantly began to unravel the basket of my life with John Wendall, reed by reed. I had to...before I found myself in a home for abandoned corporate wives/corporate sluts, weaving real baskets for retail. There had to be millions of us out there, walking clichés dumbfounded by the absurdity of it all, hunting like scavengers for the distinctiveness we had branded since our childhoods. We were proven frontrunners in innumerable fields who had given up working for recognition and singular achievement. Our livelihood now centered on propelling our husband's success; we had merely traded careers.

When you are a woman without children, the social expectation is that you have a career, or at least a job. Being a corporate wife doesn't qualify as a career. Most people cannot

comprehend the difficulty or complexity of the task. Not exactly the same as a woman who works and supports her husband while he attends dental, medical or law school, a corporate slut actually has intimate knowledge of the business and works to better her husband's company and his image. In my case, I created an illusion. I reinvented my husband and managed his life, our lives, and his company while remaining resolutely behind him. At the height of my career, my initiatives were so cleverly couched that my husband supposed he birthed all the ideas alone.

Though I had years of experience as a business owner, an entrepreneur, a top salesperson, and a corporate manager, when I sold my company and married John Wendall I became one thing only: a corporate slut. My self-appointed title always got a laugh. "Domestic Diva" was a pretentious title I couldn't abide. It connoted a spoiled, kept woman, languishing in luxury. On the contrary, a corporate slut is a working woman, albeit an unpaid one.

I've always thought of a slut as an unpaid prostitute. Prostitution by definition is the action of selling one's talents for a base purpose. For sixteen years, I poured the best of myself, my talents, my ability, my brainpower, even my body—into creating and sustaining a successful man, a successful business, and a successful marriage. It worked for a while, but in the end, I was rewarded by being surreptitiously terminated with no notice. There was no remuneration for my services.

It was my ambitiously driven nature coupled with John's mounting demands that created a very successful manufacturing company and produced sixteen years of pyrotechnics glimpsed from a roller coaster moving forward, then backward, and ultimately reeling out of control.

CHAPTER 1

Independence and individuality are primary qualifications for a corporate slut. My particular brand of uniqueness sprang from a convoluted set of circumstances that I refer to as my childhood. Born in Pittsburgh to educated parents, my mother was a teacher and my father was president of the local school board in addition to being vice-president of sales for a company that sold limestone to glassmakers. He traveled extensively, and I remember weeks in which he wasn't home. We all missed him terribly. He was an athletic man, warm and kind-hearted who would have loved my mother to birth a football team, no matter the gender. It didn't matter if they were girls or boys or a combination of both, but enough to huddle in the back yard and play a respectable game. If only my mother had been agreeable.

Having played college football and coached high school football when he was a teacher, his gusto for the game encompassed me. Our bonding on Sunday afternoons would form my life long passion for the sport. He couldn't have known his teachings would provide me another foray into a business world where football metaphors sprinkled industry-speak like chocolate jimmies on a cupcake. Years later, when I approached a customer who was a Cincinnati Bengals fan one Monday morning, I started the conversation with, "Can you believe Chris Collingsworth caught that pass at fourth down and twenty two? How pretty was that? What a gutsy call by the coach. You have to admit, moving those chains changed the whole momentum of the game." A newfound respect covered his smiling face.

I attribute much of my fierce independence, my ability to buck the status quo, to my mother. Not that she *tried* to teach me these things, mind you. She was stellar when it came to

helping with homework, but if she taught me anything about character or attitude, it was what *not* to do. I knew many kids who wanted to be just like their parents. I felt unique in my desire to be the antithesis of my mother.

She was a complicated woman. Besides herself, the person she loved most in the world was my father. She was as madly in love with him in the last years of their marriage as she was when they first met. In theory, it's wonderful to have such love, but my mother's selfishness slowly overwhelmed the purpose of parenting, decreasing the meaning of their marriage. Because my father was around so infrequently, she found herself competing with three children for his attention.

One Saturday, my dad suggested that they take us kids to the movies. He was reading the morning paper while the three of us were slurping cereal from our multi-colored metal bowls.

My mother's face fell immediately. "Sam, I'd already planned to send the kids out for an overnight tonight so *we* could go to a movie, just the two of us. I haven't seen you all week. You get to travel but I've been stuck with the kids. It's my turn now."

My dad didn't miss a beat. "Okay then, if it's your turn tonight, I'll take them to play mini-golf this morning."

We lifted our heads out of the cereal bowls in unison, eyes wide, not yet sure we could be so lucky.

"They all have chores and homework, Sam, and I have things to do here," my mother said. "I can't go with you." Her platinum hair flashed dangerously in the florescent lighting of the kitchen and her light blue eyes clouded with irritability.

"You don't have to go, Peg. I didn't ask you to go...and they have plenty of time over the weekend to do their homework." He turned to us, brown eyes twinkling, his red hair blazing atop

his six-foot two-inch athletic frame. "And I'm sure they'll work double-time to get the chores done, right kids?" He clapped his hands. "Quick, get dressed so we can go."

"Sam," my mother said. "They're not going. These kids have plenty of fun all week, but I don't. I wait all week for you to come home, and when you do I expect you to make some time for me. *Alone* time."

My mother's warning tone said that there was no arguing

One could easily wonder if my mother actually wanted children. For women of the 1950's, having children was never a question; it was an expectation. To not want children would have been blasphemous and certainly never uttered out loud. The problem was not that she didn't want us. Quite simply her maternal instincts were overpowered by her tremendous need to please herself. So she handed off the parenting duties to my grandmother, who lived with us, and instead chose to work outside the home as a teacher. She didn't do it for the love of learning or a fondness for children, but strictly for the money, and the freedom her own income allowed.

"I don't have to work," she'd explain when asked about her job. "It's just that I'd rather have custom-made drapes. They look better than JC Penny drapes. And if I want a new dress, I don't want to worry about spending the money." After a couple of martinis, a deeper story would emerge. "To tell you the truth," she'd say, "I'd go batshit if I didn't get out of the house. These kids are exhausting. Teaching high school English is a hell of a lot easier than chasing three small kids around, trying to keep them entertained, happy and not whining. God I hate the whining. How many times can I take them to the zoo for God's sake?" In an era in which mothering was the career expected of women, we were the only kids in school with a working mother. Being a teacher excused her from being a room mother for any of us, explained her exhaustion if she didn't feel like taking us to a movie, and allowed her the freedom from maternity she actively sought.

She did the usual things, like feed us and buy us clothes and kiss the boo-boo when we fell, but emotionally she was as unavailable as a flat tire. It never occurred to me to ask anything

of my mother, other than help with homework. I grew up relying mostly on myself, and while it was painful being force fed independence at such an early age I came to appreciate my autonomy later, in the male-dominated world of business.

I probably would've been a bitch on wheels if I hadn't been lucky enough to have the most positive maternal influence imaginable in Grandma.

She and my grandfather had divorced shortly after my parents married. It seems during the planning of my mother's wedding, my grandmother became aware that my grandfather had a mistress. Because it was a very large and elaborate society wedding, my grandmother waited until after the nuptials to divorce him. In 1948, divorce was rare. My grandfather married his mistress, moved to California, and had little presence in my life.

Grandma was a typical 1950's grandmother. Her slight figure was already stooped over by osteoporosis, and her reddish hair, done weekly by a beautician, was always in a curly coif. She smiled endlessly, her laugh a tinkle that was as contagious as the chicken pox of the era. My grandmother was an only adopted child and my mother was her only child. Having not been trained in anything other than being a wife and mother, and not being able to drive, she made her home with us in Pittsburgh, and my parents were happy to have her. She was with my mother for the birth of all three of her children and with all of us until I was nearly twelve years old. She was rarely gone except for occasional visits to a friend in Florida whom she cared for through a long illness.

Any maternal feelings I gleaned were from her. When I was sick, she comforted me. It was she who nursed me through the dozens of inner ear infections that plagued my early childhood, she who brought me milk and cookies as I watched Romper Room. She taught me unconditional love and it was in her lap that I felt the most prized. She taught me how to keep a house, and is responsible for my obsession with neatness. She imparted her philosophies daily and I digested them subconsciously.

“Roberta,” she would tell me, “people are not perfect and you can’t expect them to be. They have bruises, just like apples. Just because an apple has a bruise doesn’t mean you throw it away. You just eat around the bruise. When you love someone, it has to be with flaws and all.” So sunny was her outlook that she never told me that biting without thought into an apple slightly bruised to the eye, could reveal a worm hidden deep within.

If someone needed help, Grandma’s response was automatic. She expected the same from me.

“Roberta, come help me make homemade chicken and noodles for Mrs. Dickenson. She just got home from the hospital.”

“But Gram, the guys are waiting for me to play kickball.”

“You can play kickball any day, Roberta, but some days you give up a little playtime to help a friend. It’ll make you feel good, you’ll see. Didn’t Mrs. Dickenson make you cookies the last time you came home from the hospital? It’s time to return her kindness, and I’ll teach you how to make noodles, too. We’ll have fun, I promise.”

Gram was right. I helped her with the ingredients for the dough and then as she instructed, I started rolling and rolling and rolling. Before it was over my arms were shaking from the exertion and so weak from the continuous rolling and they felt like damn noodles!

“Keep going, Roberta,” Gram said. “Just a little longer. The noodles need to be paper thin, just like you!”

The art of noodle-making became a game, and Mrs. Dickenson’s grateful smile when we delivered her meal provided a belly full of warmth that taught me satisfaction worth sacrifice.

“Roberta wanted to help me make these for you because she remembered how much she enjoyed the cookies you made for her when she was sick. She didn’t even play kickball today, just so she could lend me a hand.” Gram’s smile was sincere as she tossed the credit my way.

My eye didn't catch her wink, but I felt that wink kiss my cheek, like a wisp of unseen hair that tickles. That, I knew, was her gift to me. The lesson that day wasn't just about giving; it was how to deliver a gift in multiple ways.

When you fully recognize the warmth that giving provides it can become addictive. Crediting an individual for their help in achieving a goal is like paying it forward. I learned how to confer credit for the act itself believing it did not diminish the ultimate goal of endowment even slightly.

Gram taught me never to surrender if I could help it. I had no idea that the fortitude I learned at her knee would be so invaluable later in life. Perseverance was a life lesson embedded in a card game. Instead of Go Fish, she taught me to play Gin Rummy. Regardless how many times I lost, she wouldn't allow me to walk away. No quitting, no cowardly behavior, do it 'til you get it right and always know that someday, you will get it right.

“Come on Roberta, deal the cards again, sweetheart. You could win next time, you never know. You have to keep trying. You have to keep playing so someday you can beat me. Don't give up, not unless you absolutely, positively have no other choice. That goes for most things Roberta, just remember that. This time, you're going to choose to deal another hand.”

For the record, I think I only beat my grandmother a very few times playing Gin Rummy. She never, not even on the day she died when we played our last game, let me give up. It was always, “Deal again, sweetheart. You might just win the next game.” She at least waited until I was six years old before we started playing for pennies.

While "never give up" was a flag run up my flagpole in youth, the distinction between giving up and letting go was not clearly defined. While not backing away served me well in a business sense, I later learned that unmitigated determination in terms of human relationships can injure a human spirit. The difference between giving up and letting go remained blurry for a very long time.

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Shortly before we moved to Minneapolis, when I was not quite twelve, she and my grandfather remarried after being divorced thirteen years. His second wife had become ill and died in California, but Granddad brought her back to Pittsburgh, her place of birth, to bury her. From the funeral home, he called and proposed to my grandmother and they eloped to Las Vegas the very next day.

Could there possibly be a more bruised apple? This man, whose likely motive was finding another caretaker, told her he still loved her. Gram had spent thirteen years mourning his departure and the night before she eloped she explained why she'd taken him back.

“Roberta, your Granddad is a good man. He thought he was doing the right thing marrying that woman, but he never really stopped loving me. He came back for me, Roberta. He was just biding his time with her.”

I was distraught at her leaving. She was my very best buddy in the world, this woman who made me feel cherished, even after I'd drawn a stop sign in red crayon on her bedroom wall. *My Gram all the way out in California?* I just knew it had to be a million miles away.

My grandparents were happily married another twenty-two years before a stroke took Granddad suddenly, but we were never allowed to mention the missing years. When anyone asked how long she had been married, Gram included those missing thirteen years without batting an eye. Honesty and integrity were her most valued virtues, but even Gram had a slight bruise, too.

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If a child is enlightened enough to want to be different, they usually try to excel at something socially acceptable, like piano, or tap dancing, or football. Peer acceptance generally

lies in being homogeneous. Individuality, particularly for a girl, isn't overly stressed. However, sometimes shit happens...life happens...accidents happen.

At age seven, I was riding my bike up a very steep hill in front of our house in Pittsburgh when I turned to say something to my girlfriend. The act of turning caused the front wheel of my bike to hit the curb, and as the bike reeled out of control I flew about ten feet and fell directly on my head. My mother told me that she heard the thump inside the house, even though it was autumn and the windows were closed. I was unconscious for approximately two minutes.

When I awoke, it was a neighbor kneeling over me with a blanket while my mother stood in the background. I was bundled into the car and driven to the doctor, who diagnosed a very severe concussion. Mother had to wake me every hour or two that night, and her annoyance was flagrant, even to me as a child. Dad was out of town and Grandma was in Florida tending to her sick friend, so the responsibility was hers alone.

When I woke after the accident, I began to stutter. I was confined to bed for three weeks and it was during that time that I began to understand the meaning of consequence.

You see, I had been turning around to say something mean. Cause and effect abruptly became crystal clear—I was being punished for intending to say something cruel to my best girlfriend. The stuttering was so severe I couldn't utter the simplest of words. I squinted, kicked, and balled up my fists, all in an effort to force words out of my mouth, but I couldn't even say my own name. My mother hated my stuttering even more than I did. It was as though my stuttering was an intentional affront to her parenting and she dealt with it with constant reprimands.

“Slow down, Roberta, don't talk so fast,” became her mantra. Sometimes she'd groan aloud with frustration. “*Think* about what you want to say before you open your mouth, Roberta! Maybe the words will come out right if you just think about them. Think, Roberta, *think!*”

I was amazed. Did she really believe I wanted to talk like this? If I could slow down and get the words out, wouldn't I? I couldn't explain to her what I was feeling. I couldn't talk.

The situation worsened when I went back to school. It's hard to match the cruelty that children show one another. They have elevated teasing to an art form. They had even less patience for my stuttering than my mother, and it gave them great fodder for taunting. I didn't get through a day without being teased, often to the point of tears. My stuttering was frustrating, exhausting, and terribly embarrassing. I hated it. If I could've figure out a way not to do it, I would have.

Some months later I was playing in the street when my father called me, and I vividly remember him getting on one knee and taking my hands in his. He had the kindest brown eyes I have ever seen, even to this day. They engulfed me as he simply said, "Roberta, we are going to take you somewhere where you can learn how to talk again."

My arms reached up and around his neck and I felt the roughness of his unshaven face on my cheek as I hugged him with all the strength a tiny seven-year-old could gather. I cried, so grateful.

Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh became my home for that third grade year, where with two other students, I learned how to speak with less stuttering, and learned the method of avoiding certain words when I felt sure I would stutter. I was stupefied that I couldn't talk and astonished how hard it was to learn something I didn't remember forgetting.

But I did learn, and I did get better, and bolstered by this newfound confidence, I found a way to cope with the teasing at school and protect my feelings. Stuttering would always be an obstacle I'd have to overcome, so I chose to do so with humor. I came to regard stuttering as yet another quality that made me unique—yet another unlikely badge of honor. So the more my classmates made fun of me the more I made fun of myself. If one of them mocked me, I let loose with a string of stutters—I was really good at it, after all. Whatever they did, I topped them every

time. It didn't work all of the time, but it worked most of the time. I don't know what was better, finding a new, tougher brand of confidence or making myself laugh.

It's an anomaly, I know, but my stuttering has brought a great deal of hilarity to my life. Instead of turning me inward, I twisted this malady into a platform that would launch my particular brand of humor, politely termed offbeat and self-deprecating. I still laugh the loudest when I'm making fun of myself.

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My independence made a sudden and most unwelcome leap forward with the death of my father in 1969. I was seventeen years old and a senior in high school. My sister Sheila was a freshman at Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh, my brother Scott a sophomore at Bowling Green University, in Bowling Green, Ohio. They had both been recipients of scholarships; Sheila was a national merit scholar and Scott's athletic scholarship was for football. The family domicile was in Louisville, Kentucky.

In his sophomore year, my brother fell into a bad fraternity crowd at college, lost his scholarship, and was failing. My father drove to Bowling Green on a cold November day, pulled him out of school and brought him home so he could properly ponder his future.

One night shortly after Scott's sudden arrival home, my father woke to go to the bathroom, passed out, and fell, hitting his head on the toilet. My mother managed to rouse him and convinced him to see the doctor the next day. When he was admitted to the hospital, tests revealed a shadow on his lung, which warranted exploratory surgery. On his forty-fourth birthday, November 25, 1969, the doctors discovered lung cancer, undetected by a full physical exam performed just two months earlier.

Terminal was a word I heard from the doctors, not my mother. She never openly discussed my father's prognosis, because she refused to believe that he could ever die. Their agreement, she

stated, had always been that she would depart this life first. She fully expected him to make good on that promise.

At two o'clock in the morning on December 11, 1969, my brother pulled me out of bed and dragged me to the car in my nightgown and hair curlers. I had not heard the phone ring, but Scott explained that the hospital called and requested we get there immediately. He drove to the hospital at breakneck speed. Not being told that my father had already passed, we ran down the hall to his room and pushed open the door. I'll never forget the sight of his lifeless body. I'll always regret opening that door and it took years to get that image out of my head. The rough edges of loss eventually dulled, but they never left me. My mother was in the conservatory down the hall, collapsed in disbelief. "He promised he'd let me die first...he promised me." She never considered that any of her three children might need her. She needed us.

During my father's three-week illness, mother never once left the hospital. My seventeenth birthday was spent alone in front of a TV, my brother occupied with himself and mother hospital-bound by choice.

My brother never reconciled with my father before he died. He did not see him during his illness. My sister was never told my father was ill. She believed him to be hospitalized for tests only. She never said goodbye either. I was lucky to be living at home. I got to the hospital every day.

In an instant, we became responsible for my mother. Because her philosophy of putting her husband before all others didn't take into consideration the fact that he may exit this world before her, our collective responsibility focused on meeting her needs. It was an enterprise doomed to failure because her needs were insatiable.

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The "we" quickly became "I" as Sheila and Scott both returned to college and I was left to deal with Mother alone. Her behavior became increasingly erratic. She'd leave in the middle of

the night on drives to I never knew where, leaving me at home to fret about her whereabouts and her safe return. I begged her to stay home or at least tell me where she was going or when she'd be back, but it was like talking to a mannequin. After the first dozen occurrences, I chose to stop wondering or worrying to the point of panic. It was that or be consumed wholly by my mother and her grief. I wasn't exactly sure how to cope with my own anguish and I had no idea how to deal with hers.

Some days after school, when calling her name became a mere echo of my own voice, I might find her in the basement huddled in a corner crying. Other times Mother was eager to talk, but she merely said the same things over and over: Dad would never see my upcoming high school graduation, any of our college graduations, or know his grandchildren. Soon enough the repetitious refrains of grief began bouncing off me like raindrops bounding back from the pavement in a torrential storm. She expected me to say something, offer some comfort. My failure to do so resulted in accusations of not understanding and cold heartedness. Mother believed the loss belonged to her alone. There wasn't room for anything else in her life other than grief, and certainly no room for her children. Our hurting, our loss, was not her concern.

I shopped for my prom dress with a girlfriend and used Mother's credit card. She didn't care what I bought and the only picture of me on senior prom night is the one taken in the school gymnasium. I didn't know what to do or where to put my grief. It resulted in my total lack of sympathy for her.

About four months after my father passed, Mother came into my room while I was studying. "Roberta," she said, "I have to leave for West Virginia. Grandpa isn't doing too well and your aunts and uncle don't seem to have the time to go to the farm and care for him. It's what Daddy would want me to do."

My paternal grandfather suffered from severe diabetes and as a result of complications from the disease, had his right leg amputated a few weeks before.

"And I can see Daddy every day while I'm there, too," she said, referring to his grave.

It didn't matter that I was here and Daddy was gone. To mother, her husband still trumped her kids. She left me. She took the only car we had and the dog and moved to West Virginia. She called my best friend's mother, an alcoholic unable to manage her disease, and asked her to keep an eye on me. Although I could take the bus to school, I depended on friends to take me to work and back. The only cash I had came from my job at Dairy Queen, where I earned \$1.35 an hour.

Six long weeks later, she arrived home in time to attend my graduation from high school. She cried all day and throughout the entire ceremony. My graduation, like her life, became about her loss. I went out with my friends that night and got drunk and stayed drunk until the following morning. She didn't notice. The next afternoon we moved back to Cincinnati. Mother liked it better than Louisville and decided to construct her life as a widow in a city where she was acquainted with more people.

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Around July of 1970, shortly after our move back to Cincinnati, I had a conversation with my mother that birthed my total independence from my home environment. It was the beginning of my freedom from my mother's not so high opinion of me. I decided not to attend the University of Kentucky that fall.

"Roberta, what makes you think you have a choice here?" Mother said. "You've been accepted, and you have your room assignment and even the roommate you wanted. You're going to college. End of discussion."

"Mom, I'm not going. You can't make me go. I promise I'll go to college, just not now."

I was confused and didn't know what to do, but I knew college would be a waste of time at that point in my life. I wanted to work for a year and get my bearings first. Then I'd go to school.

"Roberta, nobody ever goes back to college that says they will. This is just laziness on your part. What in the world has gotten into you? Everybody in this house goes to college and you

know that. Of course, you couldn't seem to get a scholarship like Scott or Sheila. Thank heavens your dad left money for your education. It's not that you aren't smart, Roberta, you're just not smart enough. Your father would be so ashamed if you don't go at all. You just need to work hard, that's all. You'll make it. Probably not with A's, but you'll make it. You're going and that's the end of it."

My mother wore a look sometimes that was a combination of sneer and condescension. It was hateful and extremely effective in diminishing any person. When I remember her from my child's mind, it's "the look" that I remember most. Now I was face to face with my mother, "the look" filling the room.

"Mom I'm not going. There's no point in discussing it any further."

"Roberta, you are not welcome in my home if you choose not to go to college. Pack your bags and get out." The "look" liquefied, replaced instantly by a livid contortion as her arms crossed against her ample bosom. "I'm not kidding, Roberta. I don't give a damn what kind of job you get, just get the hell out of my house. And don't you dare even think about asking for my help. Don't you dare ask."

I was permitted to take only my clothes. She didn't give me a pot or a pan, or anything, including good wishes, good luck, or encouragement to start my new life.

The family of one of my close friends, from the high school years I spent in Cincinnati, owned a large real estate company. Her older brother, now in command of the business, owned rental property and rented a furnished studio apartment to me, at a reduced rate. In return, I collected rents, swept halls, and burned trash in the incinerator.

When I unfolded the couch to become the bed, it blocked the front door. There was a half-refrigerator and a two-burner range. It was shabby but clean and independence tasted good. I always wanted to work, thinking it such a grown-up endeavor. I was forever rushing towards adulthood, assuming the sufferings of childhood insecurities didn't exist in that world. No matter

what my age in any given year, my father was heard telling friends, “Roberta, my youngest is going on thirty-five”. I’d finally found that elusive state of adulthood at age seventeen.

My rent was two weeks’ net pay. By the end of the month I was broke and had to hitchhike downtown to work. I had nothing – no TV, no radio, no car, no dishes, silverware, or glasses. Once a week I would walk to the local pizza house and carry home a large pizza. While I was waiting for my order, I would slip silverware, glasses, and a few small plates into my purse. This pizza would serve as my main sustenance for most of the week. I would ration the pieces accordingly.

Raised on high moral ground, it was difficult to justify this theft with my need, yet it didn’t stop me. My mother rarely called and never offered to help financially.

I lost my virginity to my friend’s thirty-year-old brother Roland, my landlord, that seventeenth year. I loved him because he brought me groceries. I thought love was what you were supposed to feel when you had sex with a man. First sex is rarely your best sex, but who knows that at the time? He was kind to me and a thoughtful lover. But in retrospect, I was overcharged, considering the cash I paid for rent in addition to all those blow jobs!

Finding my own way during these young years resulted in an almost total lack of fear for anything external.

"Roberta, aren't you afraid of walking home from the bar so late at night by yourself?" a coworker asked.

"Nope. If anybody lays a hand on me, I'll rip their balls off."

"Roberta, aren't you afraid hitch-hiking to work? You're getting into a car with a stranger. Anything can happen."

"Nope. If anybody lays a hand on me, I'll rip their balls off."

With an abundance of anger floating just below the surface, I was ready to rip some balls off. I couldn't wait for an opportunity.