

2015

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Recommended Citation

Kopelson, Kevin. "Meet Miss Subways." *The Iowa Review* 45.1 (2015): 194-200. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.7619>

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Meet Miss Subways

My mother, who was born on July 14, 1922, who died on May 3, 2013, and who is now the girl—or rather the grown woman—of my dreams alone, along with some pretty offbeat memories, told me that she once sang as part of a high school group for Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia. The song, she said, was “The Lost Chord.” (This had been composed by Arthur Seymour Sullivan in 1877 at the bedside of his older brother Fred during Fred’s last illness. The manuscript is dated January 13, 1877; Fred Sullivan died less than a week later. The lyrics were written as a poem by Adelaide Anne Procter called “A Lost Chord” and published in 1858 in the *English Woman’s Journal*.) And then she sang the song for me.

Mom once told me that she had once been a Miss Subways runner-up. (The Miss Turnstiles character in *On the Town*—played by Sono Osato in the original 1944 stage version of this musical and then by Vera-Ellen in the 1949 film—was based on Miss Subways.) Upon retelling this story, I often claimed that Mom won this contest.

Mom told me that she did once win a dance contest—at age sixteen in some Starlight Park in the Bronx. (She also claimed to have been given the trophy by Mitzi Gaynor, aka Nellie Forbush in the 1958 film version of *South Pacific*. If so, Gaynor would have been about six at the time. The presenter, then, must have been Mary Martin, or Nellie, from the original stage version.) Mom then performed that routine for me—a jitterbug.

I, shortly thereafter, asked Mom to teach me to dance. Our first lesson began not with the box step or something equally basic, but with the jitterbug. That was also our last lesson.

Mom told me that she’d had boyfriends other than Dad. Did any, I asked, ever propose to her? “About ten did,” she said. One of them, I now presume, must have been a guy named Seymour Pine.

Mom claimed to have gotten good grades in high school, saying the only reason she didn't get into Vassar—the college of her dreams—was that she was Jewish. Those grades, in fact, were bad.

Dad first saw Mom, the girl of his dreams, she told me, as a cheerleader for Brooklyn College at some basketball game. She then, of course, performed that routine for me. I then, of course, felt the call to become, well, some kind of *star* myself.

Mom, said Dad, used to look like Lena Horne. Mom herself told me that some Southern bus driver once told her to move to the back of the bus. (Mom and Dad had just married; Dad then went south—to Florida—for basic training; Mom visited him there.) But the driver then saw that she was white and laughed. In my retelling of the story, he does not see this, so she just moves to the back.

Mom never wore makeup—and nor, with such good skin, did she need to. This was because, she told me, she had once seen a very elegant old woman on the subway. This woman wore no makeup. Mom decided then and there to become just like her.

Mom, at five foot two, claimed to have been a very good basketball player. She claimed, moreover, to have, on various playgrounds, hustled men playing the game. Dad said it's true.

During World War II, Dad was stationed in the Aleutian Islands. My oldest siblings—the twins Ricky and Micky (Eric and Maureen)—were born while he was out there. Upon returning home to the Bronx, he suggested they all move to Alaska. Mom said no. Who can blame her? But a pattern began, it seems to me, of Dad not getting what he needed. She would later say no to a proposed move from Queens to Scarsdale because there are no subways up there, to a move to Manhattan where of course there are subways, to a vacation home near Lake George because she'd rather camp up there and at any rate doesn't want to take care of a second house, and to a boat to use there because, well, it might sink.

Mom liked to joke that, when pregnant with the twins, she was wider than she was tall. Even at five foot two, this is hard to picture. She must have meant wider *around* than she was tall.



Ida Kopelson, née Goldstein.

Brother Bob, born three years later, soon developed meningitis. Upon recovery, some doctor advised Mom to never say no to Bob. Otherwise, the kid might get mad at her and have a relapse. This doctor probably meant for Mom to never say no to Bob for a period of weeks or maybe even months. She, though, understood him to mean never say no to Bob for the rest of his life.

When Steve was born, eleven years after Bob, it soon became clear—I was later told—that he never wanted to eat anything. This, I'd later joked, may have had something to do with Mom's cooking. The only thing

Steve would eat until he was about three were milkshakes that Dad made for him. And these would have eggs thrown in for extra protein. When Steve was twenty, he once complained to Mom about being only five foot eight. (Dad was over six feet tall, as are Ricky and Bob. I myself at the time was already five ten.) "Well," she told him, "you *would* be taller if you'd ever had anything other than *milkshakes!*"

I was born—when Mom was thirty-eight—just two years after Steve. He would eventually tell me that I had been an accident. When I reported this to Dad, he joked that we were *all* accidents. And when I reported Dad's joke to Mom, she said that I, at least, had been had on purpose, "to keep Steve company."

Mom spoke strangely, I noticed early on. She never really conversed with anyone; she had monologues. These monologues were stories about either her past life or her work as a teacher of emotionally disturbed children at a school in Queens called the Lifeline Center for Child Development. (She had gotten a master's degree in psychology shortly before Steve was born. Dad, I later learned, had had to write Mom's thesis for her. Those emotionally disturbed kids were either autistic or

schizophrenic.) And most such stories were about either how someone allegedly evil—usually Dad’s mom—did something terrible to her or how Mom herself did something great *for* someone great, like sing for Mayor LaGuardia or dance for Mitzi Gaynor. Mom tended, too, to fracture speech, much like the character Mrs. Malaprop in the 1775 play *The Rivals*. (Mom once said in all seriousness, “Mothers are the necessity of invention.” She meant, of course, that necessity is the mother of invention.) Dad, in fact, used to call Mom “Mrs. Malaprop.”

The Lifeline Center was just a few miles from our house. Mom, therefore, preferred riding her bicycle to work over driving there—even throughout winters. And when she did have to drive somewhere, she would avoid highways by taking the service roads next to them whenever possible. Highway traffic frightened Mom.

One time, when I was about twelve, Mom was driving me alone to the Hebrew School at Jamaica Jewish Center—Steve, you see, had already been bar mitzvahed—when she suddenly said, “You may have noticed that you’ve begun to develop secondary sex characteristics.” I told her to knock it off, which she did. And then she never mentioned it again to me. But nor did Dad ever mention puberty—or even sex—to me.

Mom used to swim at Jamaica Jewish Center. Technically, I suppose, she should not have, as she was its only lifeguard. But she swam very, very slowly—frequently the backstroke—so she could see pretty well what was happening around her while swimming. Each day she swam, she’d swim the exact same number of laps and then cross off the next box on these fifty-mile swim cards she used to carry.

Mom, in general, was a creature of habit. During summers, she’d drive us every weekend to the Bronx Zoo. During winters, she’d take us every weekend—by subway—to either the Metropolitan Museum of Art on the east side of Central Park or the Museum of Natural History on its west side. She’d also take us every weekend throughout the year to our local library.

Mom—and Dad—would also take us to concerts. At these, Mom would always be the very first to stand up and shout *bravo*, *brava*, or perhaps *bravi*—depending on the gender of the instrumentalist or singer, as well as on the number of them. She always seemed, to me, determined to

demonstrate her mastery of those distinctions. She also seemed to consider cheering a competitive sport, like basketball.

Dad became very depressed when I was about fourteen, and so began seeing a psychoanalyst. This guy—Dr. Train—determined that analysis alone wasn't working well enough, and that Dad should also have electroshock treatment. When, afterward, Mom visited Dad in the hospital, she told him—he later told me—that he would “have to get better soon” because she “can't take this anymore.” He later told me, as well, that he found this very selfish of her.

They seemed, to me, to stop having sex after the electroshock. I once overheard an argument between Mom and Dad that confirmed this suspicion. But they were now arguing a lot in general. One time, Dad was in his study and talking on the telephone when Mom tried to go in there and vacuum. He more or less pushed her out of the room and shut the door. She then opened the door and threw the vacuum cleaner at him. He then didn't speak to her for a week. And so she more or less cried for a week. This made me very angry—only at *Dad*, whom I stupidly confronted about his silent treatment.

Dad arranged, when I was seventeen, for my very first summer job. (Other summers, I'd practiced the piano in a futile attempt to become, well, a concert pianist. This, said Dad, wasn't work. It was just play.) I was to be a file clerk at some insurance company on Wall Street. As it happened, I got very sick—with shingles—just before the job began. I could barely move, and when I did move was in a lot of pain. So when, at five minutes to five on my very first day, the vice president of that company, whose name I forget, asked me—in what seemed to be a kind of test—to help him carry some enormous desk to the basement, I told him that it was now too late for any work and that at any rate I wasn't being paid to move furniture. Dad was horrified when I reported this to him, saying I was being paid to do whatever that guy wanted me to do. Mom, though, was pleased. “Fuck 'em,” she cheered. “Fuck 'em *all!*”

I came out as gay to Mom and Dad when I was eighteen. I had called them from my dorm room at Yale, senior year. They were both on the line. I had something important to tell them, I said. But I couldn't say it. All I could do was cry. “Do you want us to guess?” asked Mom. Yes, I did. “Are you sick?” she asked. No, I wasn't. “Are you failing some class?” she asked. No, of *course* I wasn't. “Are you sexually attracted to

men?” That was it! “Is *that* all?” she asked rhetorically. “*That’s* nothing to cry about. *All* your brothers went through this.” “Did *Dad*?” I asked. There was silence on the line. “Well, of *course* he did,” Mom finally said. Dad himself said nothing.

When Steve died at twenty-one, it seemed to all of us that he had killed himself. Both Mom and Dad—ashamed—said not to tell anyone this. I, of course, ignored this advice and told pretty much everyone. Years later, though, I learned that his death—much like my conception, allegedly—was an accident. I learned, too, that Steve too had in fact been gay; it was not just some phase he had “gone through.”

“Look,” Mom snapped, upon my later mentioning some little non-sexual problem I was having with a boyfriend. “I am *not* your friend, I’m not your *therapist*, and I don’t want to hear about it!” So much, then, for Mom’s “Is *that* all?” So much, then—one must confess—for my ever wanting anything more to do with the woman.

“You realize, don’t you,” Dad asked me soon after that little non-conversation, “that your mother is *crazy*?” He meant this, I knew, quite literally. He then proceeded to describe Mom’s craziness. Years later, I learned that it has a name. Two names, in fact. Mom had both a borderline personality disorder and a narcissistic one. (The borderline personality displays, among other things, extreme black-and-white thinking as well as instability in relationships, self-image, identity, and behavior. The narcissistic personality displays a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, a need for admiration, and a lack of empathy.)

When Dad died—on July 4, 1993—his last words, according to Mom, were “I don’t feel so good.” I sort of wish they were “I don’t feel so *well*.” I wish, too, that I had been there.

After Dad died, Mom started showing signs of dementia. She also started—at various weddings of grandchildren—competing in the bouquet toss. This, of course, was rather unseemly for a woman in her seventies and now eighties. Even more unseemly was that she not only tried to win, but often did win these contests, one time doing a victory lap around the dance floor, bouquet held high above her head as if the thing were a trophy, and then shaking it at some poor young loser. And so one time, to prevent such shenanigans, I literally twisted her arm

behind her back to keep her off the playing field. I don't think, though, that anyone saw me do this.

Mom also began dating Seymour Pine. The two had not seen each other since the Depression. He had been a wrestler back then, at Brooklyn College. He became a New York City police inspector after World War II. As such, he led the raid on the Stonewall Inn, inadvertently causing the so-called Stonewall Riots in 1969 that in turn caused the gay rights movement. Seymour—or “Sy”—now proposed to Mom... again. But she turned him down, again, not wanting to “have to take care of anyone anymore.” He then broke up with her, finally realizing that she was no longer the girl of—well, if not of his dreams, then at least of his own memories.