ESSAY

THE PERILOUS DUNE

Growing up rich brought privilege and comfort to one woman—but it also came with confusion and a sense of a life that was fleeting. **By Jeanne McCulloch**

Model Suzy Parker and her daughter, Georgia de la Salle, on the beach in Barbados, 1963

When I was young, before I was old enough to lie about where I'd been the night before and how late I'd come home, the thing I lied about with frequency was my address. Not egregiously, but artfully. I would say very precisely, when asked, that I lived between Madison and Park Avenue on 73rd Street in Manhattan, which, if I had been living in the courtyard of our apartment building on the Upper East Side, would have been correct. Certainly our kitchen, 18 stories up, overlooked the courtyard, so why not claim it as my address? Nothing could have gotten me to admit to a stranger that in fact the entrance to the building was around the corner on Park Avenue, and that my family resided for 25 years in the duplex at the top. I was too afraid of what the immediate equation would be. Money. That inherited wealth could be a birthright, a genetic twist of fate as random as say, long legs or big eyes, was a notion I distrusted. How much was real and how much was illusion, and how might the perception of money make me different from anyone else? These were questions I processed uneasily as I lied about my address.

Don't talk about money. Which meant: Don't ever talk about our money.

The unlikely source of my family's financial well-being was my father, whose day-to-day reality was to sit around our living room with his nose in a book and stacks of index cards in piles by his feet, studying foreign languages. By his death in 1983, he spoke as many as 14 and spent much of the time he wasn't in our living room traveling to use these languages in their native context. He was a quiet, patient man from Missouri whose grandfather had been in the right place at the right time and had become a multimillionaire utilities magnate in the early twentieth century. This was all lore by the time it was handed down to us, but for my father, already an older man by the time I came along, there was no shame that required lying about one's address nor, for some reason,

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HENRY CLARKE/CONDÉ NAST ARCHIVE

was there any shame in not making a salary. He happily settled back into the world of his words and ideas and index cards, and gamely donned his tuxedo whenever my mother declared it was time for the next party.

Which, very often, she did. Early on, I recognized that the smell of Chanel perfume in the hallway leading to the master bedroom meant a night on the town. I would tie my father's bow tie and help push the ebony studs into his dress shirt. He would pat a cigar into the pocket of his coat. My mother wore long, feathered ball gowns with a string of emeralds around her neck, and after she left, my sisters and I would collect the stray feathers that had fallen on the rug. It was all so grand, I thought. Sometimes as I fell asleep I'd picture my parents waltzing, moving together with such grace and synchronicity, it seemed they'd been dancing together forever.

This was in the late '60s and early '70s, when on the left-leaning side of Manhattan the sociopolitical maelstrom gave birth to the limousine liberal, a breed of which my mother was a charter member. By night, she may have been high-stepping it at the Waldorf or the Colony Club in her ostrich-feather gown; when I think of her by day in that era, she is disappearing into a hired black limousine, her Hermès scarf tied neatly over her head, off to Harlem to tutor young children at a neighborhood storefront twice a week. In our family, like many families then, we put on black armbands and marched to save the planet, end the war, end poverty; we marched for civil rights and women's rights, leafleted, picketed, rode buses to Washington, D.C., to scream our heads off. Yet no one called attention to the fact that when all was said and done and everyone was off the bus, back in the gilded ballrooms of Manhattan, in true Gatsby-esque fashion, despite the times, the band played on....

Not long after I was born, my father bought a long, gray, shingled house on the beach on Long Island that stretched along the sand dunes like a giant sleeping cat. He bought it so that despite his endless pilgrimages in search of, say, a Masai warrior to practice his Maa with or a Yugoslavian bartender with whom, over a few drinks, he could hone his Serbo-Croatian, we would always have a family home. So that by shaping sand into castles, spitting watermelon seeds down each others' shirts, and surf casting for bluefish every Labor Day, we might grow roots. My mother named the house after the street sign she erected in the driveway that first summer: Children at Play. Every August, when my four half-siblings from my father's first marriage arrived with their children, it was a giant slumber party in the house by the sea. We'd fall asleep against a tumble of cousins to the steady refrain of waves gliding along the shore, the adults at the dinner table downstairs laughing, my father telling some off-color story, the moonlight outside our bedroom spackling a silver route to the horizon. The last night of every summer, when we younger ones were allowed to eat with the adults, my mother would always make a toast to the "clan," as she called us, and from her seat at the head of the table, she would hurl her wineglass over her shoulder so it shattered against the mantle in infinitesimal slivers of crystal, always just narrowly missing the painting of the nude woman above. It was a violent, passionate act that made me convinced that, amid the finger bowls, the candlelight, against the sound track of crashing waves and in the tolerant, bemused presence of a uniformed butler named Fred, perhaps we were all slightly if not totally mad, and perhaps money, or more particularly the cushion that wealth provided, had made us so.

My mother wore long, feathered ball gowns, and my sisters and I would collect the stray feathers.

We live on such a perilous dune, my mother would always say, as the August storm season approached. She would sit reading *The New York Times* on her end of the couch, her half-glasses in a slow slide down her nose, scrutinizing the weather report as the wind blew in audible moans and the sea bounded up toward our deck. She was a Florida girl, my mother, and to her hurricanes meant you filled all the bathtubs with water, put batteries in the radio and the flashlights, lit candles, opened wine, and ate everything in the freezer. We live on such a perilous dune, she would say, this could all go—and she would snap her fingers—like that.

I think now that she was speaking less on behalf of the weatherman and more in terms of the perils of fortune. In my mind I pictured us all: a giant ark, a floating mansion, drifting helplessly out to sea, scrambling for something to save. It ended up a perilous dune indeed, but not by any ministrations of nature, unless one counts the IRS as a natural disaster. After my mother died three years ago, taxes made it impossible for my sisters and me to keep the house by the sea. As fate would have it, the L fell off the street sign that very summer my mother died, and Children at Play suddenly became what it suddenly was: Children at Pay. As my father should have known, you can't sink roots in sand, that the family home he provided for his daughters would inevitably be washed away by the vicissitudes of inherited wealth. Only my mother, raised in hurricanes, foresaw the perilous *après-moi* truth.

The last summer, as we were packing up, we found my mother's ball gowns in a row of dusty garment boxes in one quiet corner of the attic. They were encased in thick plastic bags, the feathers flat, matted down over the years. The boxes smelled of mothballs. Late one night, braced by the spirit of nostalgia and red wine, my two sisters and I trudged up to the attic and bumped the boxes down two flights of stairs. Things forgotten came back: The black velvet with white ostrich around the neck was her favorite. Another was navy blue organdy with dyed blue feathers ringed at the wrists *(continued on page 153)*

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like muffs. What resulted from the sudden discovery was a spontaneous fashion show for our husbands, each of us taking turns doing exaggerated catwalk steps around the couches, littering feathers along the pale green carpet in our wake. In a video taken that night, the men are smoking cigars, while my sisters and I, flushed and giddy, segue from one costume change to the next. Yet the mirth had a disdain to it that was at once murky and palpable, that such a costume would have been so much a part of the accepted pattern of our life, and that that life—the sheen, the glow, the mythic glamour—could pass from our hands so easily and definitively, and all we could do was watch.

But what was it, really, that was passing? In truth, wearing a feathered ball gown, I discovered that night, is an uncomfortable sensation. The gown hangs heavily on the shoulders and makes a discordant swish as you labor the fabric across the room. Furthermore, the feathers tickle the cheeks. Simply putting on my mother's costume, smelling, vaguely, the stale whisper of her Chanel perfume, I calculated that this outfit, plus the teetering on high heels for an entire evening, could not have been as glamorous or regal as it was painful and tedious. On some of the white feathers, there were faint stains of her bright red lipstick. My mother always wore very, very red lipstick.

By the end of the night, the entire collection of dresses lay abandoned, collapsed like overspent party girls in a pile on the couch as we drank one more toast to the passing of time, and in the end I think my cousin's daughters, both girls in their early 20s, took a few back to college with them—good for a party maybe, get a laugh, one of them said, shrugging. The rest we took the next day to the local thrift store in exchange for a straightforward tax deduction. Take it where you can get it, my youngest sister joked, loading the feathered gowns and my mother's entire prized Lilly Pulitzer collection into the back of her Jeep in a clump.

So, money—what of it? There were beautiful times and there were terrible times, just like any family. Does the beauty of a long, gray shingled house by the sea, the bonfire lighting up the night sky on the beach every Fourth of July, the softly lit white tents where the grown-ups danced in midsummer; does the suggested postcard beauty of these scenes suggest the beautiful times were more beautiful for my family than others, or the terrible times more terrible? One of my earliest memories is when our neighbor, drunk, left his own beautiful house and swam into the sea because he didn't love his life despite his beautiful wife and beautiful kids and beautiful bank account. As the Coast Guard dragged his body out of the surf in front of our eyes, he wept that he had been saved, then swam out again and again until later that summer he finally swam out for keeps. Early on I understood that a mansion by the sea can just as easily be a jail cell as a dreamscape.

Perhaps we were all slightly if not totally mad, and perhaps money had made us so.

"The houses are all gone under the sea," T.S. Eliot wrote in one of the songs in *Four Quartets*. I thought of that line as we packed up that last summer, and of another of Eliot's, from *The Waste Land*: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins." The images of the house by the sea, the images of three young girls in matching dresses following their parents through a privileged childhood they could neither accurately explain or accurately apologize for. This was an amazing place to be a kid, I said aloud to my husband that last day.

Amaze: to fill with wonder. Also: to bewilder. Beyond the sweet, gentle smell of the honeysuckle in the driveway, the high two-toned trill of the morning bobwhite, the cold watermelon seed shooting down a shirt, gleefully spit by a boy cousin all the girls in town admired, beyond all this inevitably there are other, darker memories: of my father leaving this house for the last time strapped to an ambulance stretcher following a fatal stroke, the strap a thin, final harness to our life; of my mother living on for 20 years in a grief that became a rage, her last summers spent alone in the house by the sea in a wheelchair, accompanied by a nurse, by occasional family and friends she no longer recognized but reflexively cursed, by the endless beat of the waves that just keep coming and coming.

Don't talk about money, my mother had always warned. By which she meant: Don't ever talk about our money, the fact that we have money. Don't ever talk about it, because people may try to take advantage of you. Subtext: They won't see you for who you are, only for what you have.

This past summer, I took my son Sam to a beach a few towns down from the house where I had grown up so he could Boogie Board. It was a late August day, the water warm, the sky dark blue in anticipation of autumn. The corn was lush and tall in every field we passed as we headed toward the public beach parking lot. For a while Sam flung himself through the surf, a buoyant puppy. When he was exhausted, he dragged his board out, and we stood together at the shore looking out at the view I had watched my whole life from the quilted bedroom at the top of the stairs in the house by the sea. The waves that just keep coming and coming and coming. Sam stared quietly for a while at the horizon as he caught his breath, then he turned to me with his gap-toothed smile, his eyes full of the sheer exuberance of wonder and said, "Think about it, Mom. Infinity. Come on. I mean, you gotta love it."

Being almost nine, Sam likes to boggle his brain with big concepts like that. And I thought, so there it is. His legacy isn't about any cushion of wealth that's going to soften his ride. His legacy is infinity, the sense of infinite possibility. His possibilities, no less than mine, are infinite after all, as endless as the waves. They just keep coming and coming and coming. That is his ticket to ride. ◆