Mother Dolores Hart, O.S.B.
and Richard DeNeut

THE EAR of the HEART

An Actress’ Journey from Hollywood to Holy Vows

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IGNATIUS PRESS      SAN FRANCISCO
For the continual renewal of religious life in the Church

—Mother Dolores Hart, OSB
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Preface

What can be sweeter to us, dearest brethren, than this voice of our Lord inviting us? Behold, in his loving mercy the Lord showeth the way of life.

—Rule of Saint Benedict

The Rule of Saint Benedict, composed in the year 530, is justly celebrated as an unerring guide for those seeking to dedicate their lives to God. The Rule is followed by the women in the Community of the Abbey of Regina Laudis in Bethlehem, Connecticut, which has been my home and my life for five decades.

Regina Laudis was elevated to the status of an abbey in 1976, but when I entered in 1963, it was a small, enclosed monastery. There was a considerable fuss made in the press at the time of my entrance because I had enjoyed some success as an actress in the movies and on the New York stage. From time to time over the years, there were invitations to write a memoir, and I gave the undertaking some small consideration. I had ample material to draw upon—I had kept journals from an early age and was an entrenched saver of letters and articles concerning my life—and I had no problem seeing myself in the driver’s seat.

On a Sunday morning in 1997, however, my life changed dramatically. When I awoke and put my feet on the floor, I was unable to walk. Subsequently and belatedly, I was diagnosed with peripheral sensory neuropathy, a neurological disease affecting the peripheral nerves and causing severe chronic pain. For the next several years I experienced a dark night of the soul, unable to find any real relief from the pain or any understanding of the cause of the disease. During this time my Community suggested again that I write the story of my life, which now seemed a total absurdity since I had no command of my arms, hands or feet and my mind was blistered with pain and anger. It was, I thought, impossible.
In 1982, Dick DeNeut had come to my aid as I was wrestling with the prospect of helping Patricia Neal with twelve hundred pages of unmanageable notes for her autobiography, As I Am, which with Dick’s collaboration was published in 1988.

Dick is a close friend and a trusted confidant. In his childhood, he had been one of the darlings of the Our Gang comedies, and when we met in 1957 he still had boyish good looks and the most infectious Maurice Chevalier smile. He shared his knowledge about films and theater, which educated and enlightened me, and I was constantly astounded to see what I considered the best in the business fall by the sword of his unyielding standards and acerbic wit. Early in my acting career, Dick and I had a romantic relationship, but my religious vocation has allowed Dick and me to reconnect and to find a way to be committed in love through a greater body, that of Regina Laudis.

In 1970, when I pronounced my perpetual vows and was consecrated as a cloistered Benedictine nun, I invited Dick to hold my veil during the ceremony. I understood the extraordinary way in which he had “veiled” me throughout my professional life, making certain that my image was appropriately received by the press through his company, Globe Photos. In every professional context, he was there to inform and address the world at large that my person was to be kept within a virginal integrity, and he maintained that demand fiercely. Catholic or not, he is for me a Saint Joseph person.

So when the Community asked me to write my story, I knew I needed Dick’s help to do it. Our work began within unusual and challenging limits. He lives in Los Angeles, California; I in a cloistered abbey in Bethlehem, Connecticut. When Dick traveled to Regina Laudis, our meetings had to be conducted within the confines of the enclosure and during the few hours each day I had free from my duties as prioress and dean of education. This book represents a partnership that demanded not only honesty, integrity and trust, but professionalism of a high degree.

At the beginning of The Song of Bernadette, a film I saw as a child and still love, are these words from the author Franz Werfel: “For those who believe, no explanation is necessary; for those who do not, no explanation is possible.” Nevertheless, I have presented in these pages
the details of my life so far as a response to the question I have been asked countless times: How could I throw away a promising acting career for the monastic life of a cloistered nun?

I left the world I knew in order to reenter it on a more profound level. Many people don’t understand the difference between a vocation and your own idea about something. A vocation is a call—one you don’t necessarily want. The only thing I ever wanted to be was an actress. But I was called by God.

Mother Dolores Hart, OSB
Introduction

“Do you think I have a responsibility to write my story?”

That is the question that Mother Dolores Hart, the new prioress of the cloistered Benedictine Abbey of Regina Laudis, asked me on a warm Connecticut afternoon in May of 2001. We were walking with the newly installed abbess, Reverend Mother David Serna, now called Mother Abbess. It was the day after her abbatial blessing, confirming her status as the second abbess of the Community founded by Reverend Mother Benedict Duss in 1948.

Mother Dolores and I had spoken of the possibility of her writing and my editing her autobiography several times over the past two decades, during and after our collaboration with Patricia Neal on her memoir, which was written at the abbey. Mother Dolores had been the subject of newspaper, television and magazine attention when, as young film and Broadway actress Dolores Hart, she abandoned a promising acting career for a life as a cloistered nun, a decision that was tagged “sudden” by the media and predicted to be of short duration.

The question she directed to me that day came almost forty years after that decision and her entrance into Regina Laudis. Mother Dolores and I had known each other for forty-four years.

In 1957, just out of the army, I went to work for the photo agency Globe Photos in Hollywood. Globe’s specialty was photojournalistic coverage of the film industry for domestic and international publications. In those days, Globe pictures were the mainstay of the movie fan magazines, now obsolete but in their heyday the most successful group of publications in the country. The editor of several of them, Bessie Little, assigned Globe Photos to shoot a layout on an ordinary girl caught up in the glamor of a night on the town in Hollywood. The girl was to be Bessie’s niece Susie Grobstein. Globe was asked to supply a fresh Hollywood couple to host the evening and a young bachelor to accompany Susie as her date.
Jim Stevens, a publicist at Paramount Pictures and my contact at the studio, suggested, as the Hollywood couple, up-and-coming Earl Holliman and the new contract actress Dolores Hart, who had just completed a film with Elvis Presley. I was the only young bachelor at Globe.

The layout, which included dinner at Trader Vic’s and Margaret Whiting’s opening at the Moulin Rouge, was pleasant enough. Everyone had a good time, and Bessie Little picked up the tab. Earl and Dolores made an attractive couple, and Susie couldn’t have been more starstruck. The young bachelor, for the first time in his life, was dazzled.

Not only was Dolores beautiful; she was bright and witty and very down-to-earth—a killer combination. Dolores didn’t have starlet glitter. She had a glow and an openness that put me in mind of happy college days. She could talk about something besides herself, and I was impressed with the way she related to Susie that night—as if they were high school confidantes. A big plus was her wicked sense of humor with well-placed zingers that found in me an especially appreciative audience.

A short while after that introduction, a relationship developed between us, and there has been no time since that we haven’t been in touch. She even invited me to participate in her Consecration in 1970.

But it wasn’t until 1979 that our potential grew beyond what I had envisioned in 1958. A close friend was very ill and had returned home to Louisiana to die. That September I flew to Monroe to say goodbye, and while there I called Mother Dolores to say I was halfway across the country and would like to see her. She said I had better get myself to Regina Laudis the very next weekend because it was the last weekend before the Community’s annual October retreat, when they did not have guests. I did just that.

Mother Dolores and I had a daylong reunion in one of the abbey’s parlors. At the end of that day, somehow, with only a one-semester course in film editing at UCLA behind me—we’re talking a gap of twenty-seven years—I agreed to edit a decade of 8 mm movie coverage of Regina Laudis into a film that would be the Community’s contribution to the Vatican celebration of Saint Benedict’s fifteen-hundredth
anniversary. It would be the first of many ventures that would keep me close to Mother Dolores and Regina Laudis.

After the publication of Patricia Neal’s book, whenever the subject of Mother Dolores’ autobiography came up, I was afraid to commit, for fear I might not be as objective an editor as I would need to be. In truth, I was always secretly relieved when the subject was dropped, even though decades after her entrance into the cloister, press interest in Mother Dolores had not faded.

To this day, a month does not go by without some media request. Mother Dolores knows without a TV Guide when one of her films has aired on television because requests for visits to Regina Laudis increase overnight. She still receives what she jokingly refers to as “fan mail” from people around the world, admirers of long ago and young people who after seeing one of her movies for the first time investigate her on the Internet.

There have been invitations from movie producers to cooperate in a film of her life story, and in her forty-ninth year as a contemplative, she was named one of the ten most important Catholics by Inside the Vatican. In 2005 she was included in the exhibit God’s Women: Nuns in America at the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington, DC. Just last year, she was recognized by the Breukelein Institute, which honors men and women whose lives “have illumined the human experience”, and she was the subject of a documentary produced by Home Box Office that was nominated for an Oscar. This year, the Christophers presented her with their Life Achievement Award at their sixty-third annual ceremony.

With each request, each tribute, thoughts of a book would be revived. So it came as no surprise that, on that May afternoon, she was being forced to consider again that possibility. I just wished she hadn’t asked it that way: “Do you think I have a responsibility to write my story?”

Of course she did. She is the only person who can tell what drew her to a life of monastic enclosure so strongly that she could sacrifice the realization of the dream she had since childhood and, more importantly, what has kept her steadfast and devoted for half a century. Additionally, her story can reach out to young people who find themselves living a
contradiction between their inner truth and the values of the world around them.

“Yes”, I answered.

“I won’t do it without you”, she said.

“Then,” I said, with less trepidation than I would have expected, “you’ve got me.”

“Be careful,” she warned, her justifiably famous blue eyes sparkling as she nodded toward Mother Abbess, “I’ve got a good witness.”

Work on the memoir began in the summer of 2002. We made the decision to compile her recollections in a Q&A format—I was the Q—recording the interviews and using as our research base the extraordinary archive she has maintained since she was very young. Early in her childhood, she heard a voice telling her to “keep everything; you will have need of it someday.”

Her life from an early age to well into her monastic years is recorded in a host of spiral notebooks. She has kept every letter, and she was a prodigious correspondent; every note and sketch, and she was an inveterate doodler. Her mother had made a huge scrapbook about her career. There are leather-bound scripts full of notes in her tiny, scrunched up, analytically pregnant hand.

What she did not personally hoard came from family and friends. When her mother and grandmother died, all of her letters to them were returned to her. I found a box of her letters written to me the year she was on Broadway. A fan in Texas compiled twelve scrapbooks about her and generously sent them to her after she entered Regina Laudis. It took many, many months to sift through this treasure trove of memories.

You will hear two voices in the memoir—Mother Dolores’ and mine. Occasionally interrupting the narrative are casual exchanges taken directly from the tapes of our interviews.

Half of this collaboration is not Catholic and, at the beginning, was lamentably lacking in many facets of Catholic religious life, notably in my misunderstanding of the term call as used in expressions such as “I had a call” or “I was called.” I spoke to people in the Church and read what I could to enlighten me. But, frankly, it all sounded either highfalutin or fuzzy. I badgered Lady Abbess, the founder of Regina Laudis, to the point of exasperation—hers not mine. But after repeated queries, I hadn’t found
an answer that I could relate to personally. Again I approached the abbess, this time using Mother Dolores as my emissary.

Upon hearing that I had that same old question, Lady Abbess heaved a weary sigh and said, “Mother, you tell Dick that a call can’t be explained any more than you can explain falling in love.”

Richard DeNeut
The Road to Bethlehem
There is a tiny room in the basement of the abbey building at Regina Laudis, just down the hall from the laundry. It measures eight by ten feet but seems smaller because of all the things in it.

There are two tables that by themselves almost fill the space—one against a wall and the other, serving as a desk, in the center of the room. Half of the desk’s surface is taken up by a huge cage, home to an African gray parrot named Tobiel (Toby for short) whose vocabulary consists of “Toby’s sweet”, “Go to church!” and “Mazel tov!” On the second table sits another, even larger cage, home to eight pairs of finches of various descriptions, next to a cage of normal dimensions accommodating a sick bird—a kind of finch infirmary.

There is a tiled sink from the time the room was used as an art studio and two chairs—both larger than necessary but all that was available when the room became an office. High up are cupboards—one of which contains leather-bound scripts of fifteen movie and TV productions and one Broadway play, and another crammed with videotapes and DVDs of films sent by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. File cabinets of various sizes and styles fill the remaining wall space, providing surfaces for a small refrigerator, a fax machine, three telephones, and a heater; a globe of the world as it was known in the sixteenth century; an anti-pirating DVD player (also a gift from the Academy); books, scrapbooks, journals and framed photographs; a twenty-eight-volume DVD collection of the Carol Burnett TV show, a gift from the star herself; Christmas ornaments that picture Bob Hope and play his “Silver Bells”; and several floppy, wide-brimmed garden hats.

Hanging on hooks attached to the door are heavy aprons, a raincoat, craftsmen tools, farm utensils, bits of electrical wiring and some hand-knit sweaters in pastel pink and baby blue.

This is Corpus Christi, Mother Dolores’ office. It is where, as prioress, she communicates with the outside world, reads and evaluates
requests from would-be visitors, arranges living accommodations for
guests, oversees (she prefers to say “undersees”) the dramatic produc-
tions of the abbey’s Act Association and visits by professional artists
who come to the abbey to give of their talents (the list is impressive),
considers subjects for Education Deanery seminars, “undersees” the
photo and video (now digital) recording of abbey life and, most impor-
tantly, gives her ear to any member of the Community who needs her.
She is also available for anything the abess asks of her.

—Might that include sweeping the floor?

She wouldn’t ask that.

Too demeaning?

She wouldn’t trust me with her broom.

Corpus Christi also served as my office for two or three months each year
during the past ten years. In that time, for three hours each afternoon, it
was the place where Mother Dolores and I worked together on this manu-
script. Originally, out of respect for the cloister, we met in one of the
abbey parlors, but taping her recollections separated by the grille, which
was not recorder-friendly, became burdensome, so permission was given
for us to work inside the enclosure—certainly a major exception to clois-
tered life and one that added a laptop and tape recorder to the room.

To describe the working area as cramped I need only say that when
both of us were seated, it was impossible for either of us to move
without the other having to move too.

Our chairs faced each other, which allowed me to study that face,
framed by the wimple, as Mother Dolores spoke into the recorder. As a
flattering device, nothing beats a wimple in focusing attention—and
hiding wrinkles. Mother Dolores has very few of those, belying the fact
that she is now in her seventies. Her face is still beautiful. Her blue
eyes, large and expressive, settle into a thoughtful gaze as she delves
into the past—now pensive as she conjures the odor of vanilla beans
being ground into powder in her grandmother’s home; now bright and
mischiefous as she recalls a tomboy acing out the neighborhood rough-
necks by being the last kid to get out of the way of an approaching
train; now moist as she relives playing a clarinet solo on a late-night TV show for her grandfather as he lay dying; frequently troubled, hesitant at the prospect of speaking publicly about the mystery of enclosed religious life. They can flash, too, in an unexpected explosion of temper. The lady has a temper.

Now and then, my attention would be gently interrupted by the ever-so-slight movement of her feet. Her special shoes, sensible and protective, cannot conceal the motion of pain-plagued feet inside, moving constantly, trying without much success to find a comfortable resting place. It was something we never averred because this was our working time, our professional time.

—Where shall we start?

How about flashbacks in a movie? Tell me things I don’t know.

Well, did you know I ran away from home once?

I ran away from home when I was four years old. I ran away in the middle of the night with my mother. We were leaving my grandparents’ house on Hermitage Avenue in Chicago, where we had been living after Daddy left for Hollywood. He had gotten a contract with MGM studio, and Mommy and I were going to join him. We were running away because Granny and Grandpa were dead set against Daddy. They thought he was a good-for-nothing.

We sneaked out of the house very quietly, but as soon as we reached the street I suddenly remembered I had left my panda bear behind in Granny’s bedroom. I started crying, so Mommy slipped back into the house and retrieved my beloved bear while Granny slept peacefully. I don’t remember if Mommy handed the bear to me or me to the bear; I was only two inches taller than Panda. The two of us had to sit on Mommy’s lap for most of the train trip because she could afford only one seat. But we didn’t care. We were going to see Daddy. In Hollywood!

We rode for what seemed like years. It was the beginning of World War II, and I remember there were so many soldiers and sailors on the
train, all so much taller than Panda and I that it was like a forest of uniformed pant legs. I remember looking out the window and seeing the beautiful California desert for the first time and then, against the background of a bright sunset, tall slender trees with feathers blooming on top. They were palms, and I was to discover that California had thousands and thousands of them. Over the next several years this route would become a familiar journey, but the sudden magic of the palm trees against the Pacific curtain of the sky would never fail to take my breath away.

Four years earlier, in January of 1938, Dolores’ future parents were just graduating from high school, where they had been sweethearts since the eighth grade. Edmund Burdell Lyhan Hicks, nicknamed Bert, was seventeen years old. Harriett Lee Pittman was sixteen. Both had eye-catching good looks and shared tattoos acquired in a moment of youthful recklessness, decades before tattoos on teenagers came into vogue. Harriett’s tattoo, however, remained unfinished: while the tattoo artist was working on hers, Bert passed out and that ended the session.

Shared, too, were dreams of marriage and careers in the movies. The latter was put temporarily on hold when they had to marry earlier than planned. This circumstance caused Harriett’s mother, Esther Bowen, and stepfather, Fred Kude, both of whom frowned on the relationship, a great deal of grief and spawned a serious but brief consideration of abortion. Harriett, in a characteristic show of defiance, totally rejected this advice. Esther and Fred reluctantly accepted “that wild good-for-nothing” as a son-in-law, even though there would never be any affection between them and him, and Esther paid for all the maternity expenses.

The newlyweds were forced to move in with the Kudes, but as soon as they could afford it, they set up housekeeping in a small apartment in Chicago, adjacent to well-traveled train tracks. Harriett found employment as a secretary, while Bert tried various endeavors, including truck driver, furniture mover and salesman for ladies’ shoes. He did not, however, settle down to the responsibilities of marriage, and this, combined with his drinking, caused increasingly frequent arguments between the young couple. Instead of trying to work things out themselves, the
two kids—which is what they were—took their gripes, *Rashomon*-style, to their respective families, who were not stingy with advice.

After particularly violent arguments when Bert, drunk, would strike her, Harriett would run back home to Esther and Fred. The next day, refusing their advice to leave him, she would go back to her husband. Despite the increasing abuse, sometimes provoking police intervention, Harriett remained in love with him.

The arrival of Dolores Marie Hicks at 10:30 A.M. on October 20, 1938, was cause for great celebration in both the Hicks and the Bowen clans. She was the first grandchild and served temporarily to patch the cracks in her parents’ marriage. Bert adored his daughter. With huge blue eyes, she was a beautiful baby, beneficiary of the drop-dead-gorgeous genes that ran so generously through both sides of her family.

To my father I was “Punkin”, but I was named after my great-aunt Frieda, who that same year became Sister Dolores Marie in the order of Saint Joseph of Carondelet in Saint Louis. Mommy brought me to her Investiture because my aunt was hopeful that I could be baptized in the Church at the same time. There was precedent. Daddy had been baptized Catholic. He was even an altar boy, though he had never practiced his religion enough even to be considered “fallen away”. The baptism wasn’t destined to happen, however, not then. The Church didn’t allow it. So I wasn’t baptized until ten years later.

Dolores was born into families that could easily be the hard-edged versions of the zany Sycamores in that year’s Oscar-winning picture, *You Can’t Take It with You*. Her paternal grandfather, John W. Lyhan, called Jack, came from a wealthy railroad clan. The family line dated back to nineteenth-century England and Sir Thomas Atkins, a member of Queen Victoria’s palace guard. His service to the queen earned Tommy, as he was called, such royal affection that he was knighted. Additionally, Her Majesty presented him with the christening gown of baby Prince Alfred, which has been passed down through generations of Dolores’ family. Legend has it that “Tommy”, the universally used nickname for British soldiers, in wide currency from the 1880s through World War I, was in honor of Sir Thomas and immortalized by Rudyard Kipling in his 1892 *Barrack-Room Ballads*. 
Added to the English mix were Dutch, French, Irish, Welsh, and Norwegian, as well as a touch of the exotic—a red-headed Jewess from Spain and an American Indian. In 1871 the Atkins side of the family settled in Chicago, where they saw their home burned to the ground in the great fire.

The entire Atkins-Hicks tribe was churchgoing with religious convictions as varied as their nationalities: Catholic, Jewish and Protestant, as well as Christian Science and Mormon. Dolores’ great-grandparents, Reuben and Eliza Atkins, English converts to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, moved from England to Salt Lake City to join Brigham Young, but when that leader espoused polygamy, Atkins refused to take another wife, earning the leader’s wrath. The couple was ordered to leave Salt Lake City within twenty-four hours.

Jack Lyhan and Dolores’ paternal grandmother met in college, where Jack was a blackface performer in minstrel shows, giving vent to an urge to perform that had been thwarted by his parents’ insistence that he study to become a doctor. Mary Atkins, known as May, was the daughter of successful farmers. She had hoped to become an actress, traveling for a short time with a theatrical group performing at resorts in Indiana and Wisconsin. But, at the turn of the century, an actress was considered half a step above a trollop, so her family pushed her into a teaching career in speech and dramatic arts.

Jack, a Catholic, and May, a convert at marriage, produced three children: John, Bert and Betty. But Jack was not a model head of household. He was an abusive husband and father, whose main targets were his wife and second son, Bert, both of whom were subject to severe beatings. May, in turn, compensated for this abuse by overprotecting Bert, babying and spoiling him.

The cruelty and maltreatment over the next five years rose to such a level that finally even her priest advised May to divorce her husband. She took the priest’s advice, repeatedly refusing Jack’s pleas to reconcile, preferring to rear the children alone.

In 1929 May took a second husband, James Earl Hicks, whom she had met at a political convention. A tall man with Clark Gable good looks, Hicks didn’t have Lyhan’s formal education or moneyed background, but he promised to be a more affable family man.
May’s second union added three girls, Gladys, Shirley and Virginia, to her first family of three, all of whom Hicks adopted. Hicks turned out to be only a sometimes jolly parent. Gladys and Shirley remembered that he could be “unbelievably mean”. He too was rough on Bert, whose dependency upon his mother grew stronger. His siblings remember that Bert was always involved in some theatrical venture or another. He figured out early that all he needed to get by were his good looks and bad-boy charm, a tactic that separated him from his older brother, John, who was, even at an early age, ambitious and hardworking.

In the mid 1930s, after several successful years as a manufacturer of flavored butter spreads, Hicks lost his business. He was forced to move his family into a modest flat on the north side of Chicago. Money was scarce, though he managed to scrape together enough to have a nice Christmas in 1935. But on that Christmas Day, Hicks left the house on an errand and never came back, leaving May to raise all six children alone in the middle of the Great Depression.

—Of all my ancestral transgressors of laws or moral codes or commandments, the one I find difficult to forgive is Grandpa Hicks. He may have been suffering—he had just lost his business and couldn’t provide for his family—and perhaps felt he couldn’t live up to the tenets of his Christian Science beliefs. But he walked out on his family on Christmas, and, to my mind, that was not Christian. That was a sin.

May Hicks could have taken her children and gone home to the family farm, but she was ferociously proud. She wouldn’t ask anyone, including her parents, for anything. She resolved to leave teaching for better-paying employment, but she went from one low-paying job to another until she and her children found themselves and all their belongings on the sidewalk. Young Bert was especially upset, flying into a rage, breaking windows and creating havoc. It was the first time the family became aware of his violent side.

The Salvation Army came to their aid, moving the family temporarily into their Home for Women and Children and helping May land a job demonstrating Singer sewing machines at the Marshall Field’s department store. May rose with regular promotions to the position of buyer.
in the furniture department. While she was working, her “first family”
took on the responsibility of caring for her “second family” in their new
home, a duplex on Chicago’s west side. But she never forfeited her
position as matriarch and maintained a strong influence on her children,
investing them with a keen awareness of the hard realities of life. She
saw to it that all of them attended church every Sunday, and she passed
on her signature optimism. Even during the blackest days, her mantra
was “Things are going to get better.”

—I remember her as genteel and high class, in many ways the
perfect foil for my other grandmother, who had more than a
passing acquaintance with the mean streets of Chicago.

Esther Pittman Brown Kude née Bowen, though of a different class, was
on a par in rank with May. She was also a beauty, but what made the
two women close was that Esther was an equally proud and strong lady.
Having been born poor, she learned early how not to get pushed around.

—She loved to tell the story of how she walked to school
without shoes in 18-degree weather, not because she didn’t have
shoes—she had one pair—but just to show the kids how tough
she was.

Esther was thrice wed, the first time at age sixteen to Lee Pittman,
Harriett’s father. Shortly after Harriett’s birth, Pittman got a teenage girl
pregnant. When Esther learned of this she did two things. She demanded
he shave every hair off his body because “if he was going to behave like
a baby, he was going to look like one.”

—And he did as he was told.

Then Esther divorced him so that he could marry the pregnant girl,
Helen, with whom he had a long, happy marriage and seven children.
The resilient Esther remained friendly with her first husband, now a
Catholic convert, and saw to it that Harriett did the same. Harriett and
her father were close for his entire life, and she often brought Dolores
with her when she visited his home in Williamsfield, Illinois.

When Harriett was nine, Esther married her second husband, Paul
Brown, who was a preacher and a wife beater. One day Brown took off
for California and never came back. Alone, with mounting bills, Esther got a job as a waitress at a local bar and grill called the Round Table, a job she would keep for the rest of her life.

After Esther’s second divorce, Fred Kude, a projectionist at a local movie house, entered her life. This union would provide the stable core in Dolores’ early years.

When Dolores was two years old, Bert and Harriett separated, the first of many partings in their turbulent union. Those two years had been frustrating ones for Bert, who drifted from one meaningless job to another, increasingly fearful that fame and fortune would elude him. He began to drink more and more heavily and was as abusive to his wife as his father had been to his mother. But, his brother remembered, “Bert had to get drunk to be as cruel as our father was sober.” At one time or another, Dolores’ paternal aunts all witnessed violent outbreaks, with Harriett running screaming from Bert’s attacks, sometimes carrying tiny Dolores in her arms.

Harriett filed for divorce, charging cruelty. Before it was granted, however, the judge called the couple into his chambers and effected a reconciliation. He wrote up a Code of Conduct that both the eighteen-year-old wife and nineteen-year-old husband had to sign. Convinced that the paper was a good foundation for future stability, the judge dismissed the suit. The story made the Chicago newspapers, which printed the agreement. Under the terms of the Code of Conduct, (1) Bert had to attend church voluntarily for one year, (2) both had to agree not to run to their parents to settle future domestic problems but (3) allow Bert’s lawyer to act as arbiter of any dispute.

The well-intentioned judge’s code would not ultimately save the marriage, nor would it end Bert’s violence toward Harriett. But the fresh start was benefited by Bert’s getting a job as a commercial model, something for which he was suited. He posed as the attractive suitor admiring the soft hands of the beautiful girl in magazine ads for Jergens lotion. He filled the same role in ads for Lady Esther 4-Purpose Face Cream and Trushay hand lotion. He also began appearing in the popular, photo-illustrated romance novelettes, featured in women’s magazines such as McCall’s and Good Housekeeping. These photos dramatized scenes from the stories. They were not a particularly impressive showcase,
but Bert achieved minor star status, which fed his ego, and the jobs brought him into contact with a lot of pretty and available girls, which set him on the road to chronic infidelity. He basked in this attention and no longer minded having to take the occasional regular job when he wasn’t working as a model.

While Bert was moonlighting as a soda jerk at the Aragon Ballroom, a job he took as a way of meeting influential people, he was discovered by the Chicago-based talent scout for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Definitely the matinee-idol type at six foot two, Bert bore a striking resemblance to one of that studio’s biggest stars, Robert Taylor, especially with the mustache he grew at the talent scout’s request. Thirty-something Taylor was about to depart MGM for the army. Presumably as a twenty-one-year-old replacement for him, Bert was tested and signed by MGM to a stock player contract. In the days when studios had stables of actors under contract, it was a usual practice to keep their stars in line by having a similar—and often younger—type in the wings. James Craig was MGM’s threat to Clark Gable. Warner Bros. had Dane Clark for defense against John Garfield. Sheree North, in her blonde-bombshell period, was signed by Twentieth Century-Fox when Marilyn Monroe was misbehaving. Rarely did any of the threats go beyond being just that.

Bert Hicks would not prove an exception. In his first year under contract, he did bit parts in four MGM movies before the studio dropped his option. Almost immediately he was signed by Twentieth Century-Fox, and he appeared in a walk-on with Betty Grable in *Sweet Rosie O’Grady* before World War II interrupted his career. He joined the Army Air Forces and took his training at Sheppard Field in Texas.

In 1943, Broadway’s Moss Hart wrote and put into production the US Army Air Forces’ *Winged Victory*, which followed a group of air cadets through their training to the nightly raids on Germany and Japan. A call went out to Air Forces servicemen who had been actors to fill the cast. When the show opened in November 1943, the cast featured 209 members of the armed forces, including future stars Karl Malden, Edmond O’Brien, Red Buttons, Don Taylor, Gary Merrill, Barry Nelson, Lee J. Cobb, Kevin McCarthy and Peter Lind Hayes. Two of those, Malden and Taylor, would work with Dolores a decade and a half later.
Private Bert Hicks had a small part in the play, and a close buddy, Alfred Arnold Cocozza, nicknamed Freddy, sang in the chorus. Malden and fellow cast member Phyllis Avery remembered Bert as being gregarious and fun but also an irresponsible actor. He would miss performances and, without his wife and child near, most of his free time was spent drinking and womanizing.

*Winged Victory* became the megahit of the 1943 Broadway season, winning critics and audiences alike. When the show closed in May 1944, Bert brought his buddy Freddy Cocozza home to Chicago to meet his sister Betty, whose photo had taken Freddy’s fancy. He was a hefty man with a voice that had been compared to Enrico Caruso’s and wasn’t shy about showing off his talent.

—*In fact, he used to sing so often—and so loud—that Granny once told him to shut up when he all but shattered her wine glasses. Aunt Betty, however, was more than impressed. Aunt Betty was in love.*

The entire cast of *Winged Victory* transferred to the screen when Bert’s home studio, Twentieth Century-Fox, made the movie version in 1944. Bert’s role barely survived in one scene. Directed by George Cukor, the movie is the typically patriotic, sentimental fare of the war years, but its cast includes five future Oscar winners: Malden, O’Brien, Buttons, Judy Holliday in her film debut and Cukor, who would also be one of Dolores’ future directors.

Bert Hicks might have been starring in movies if the war hadn’t interrupted his career at Fox. After the war, the return of Henry Fonda, Tyrone Power and Victor Mature shoved Bert back to stock-player status, acting in B movies and appearing opposite aspiring actresses in screen tests. But his name popped up with regularity in the columns, usually preceded with the words “heartthrob” or “sigh guy”.

Harriett was always supportive of Bert, subordinating her own dreams of a career to his. After she and Dolores joined Bert in Los Angeles, she committed herself to making the marriage work, hoping that Bert would change. Bert’s infidelity was, of course, beyond Dolores’ comprehension. It wasn’t until she was in her teen years that Harriett
confided to her that her father had been unfaithful during their entire married life.

I remember the fights, the yelling, but I don’t think I really connected them with the bruises I would often see on my mother. I remember, too, long periods of silence and waiting for the next explosion. It always came. But as violent as he would get with my mother, my father never lifted a hand to me. He never struck me or even said a cross word to me. I was never afraid of him. I always knew that he loved me and had a sense of pride in me. But I don’t remember Daddy being a constant presence in my life.

We did have happy times as a family, especially when things were going well for him at the studio. Most of those memories are centered on trips to the beach. Both my parents adored the ocean, Mommy especially because she loved looking tan. They would pack me and my new favorite toy, Bulgy, a huge pop-eyed red rubber whale who had replaced Panda in my affections, in the rumble seat of our secondhand car, and off we would go for a day at Santa Monica Beach. While Mommy and Daddy sunned and swam, I was kept literally under wraps because I would sunburn in five minutes.

Happy, though, wasn’t the right word for our life. Frantic would be more like it. It seemed as if we were always running to get somewhere, as if we could keep ahead of threatening undercurrents.

Those undercurrents, Aunt Shirley remembered, reached a violent climax when her brother struck Harriett with such force that he broke her jaw. She was hospitalized and finally bowed to the fact that she was married to an unstable, sadistic man. She made the decision to separate for good, and fearful that Bert might come to the house when she wasn’t there and take Dolores, Harriet sent her to Chicago to stay with Grandma and Grandpa Kude until the situation was finalized.

The only problem was I had to go alone. Granny would be at the Chicago station to meet me, but for the three-day journey I was on my own. Well, not really. Mommy made arrangements with one of the porters, a big black bear of a man, to take charge of me. You could do things like that then. She bought two seats so I could have room to sleep
and sewed a label on my coat with my particulars—identification, destination and into whose hands I was to be delivered. I didn’t like having that sign on me, but I wasn’t in the least frightened. It was another adventure. Even so, I was sad. I knew that Mommy and Daddy weren’t going to live together anymore.

Dolores’ visit to Chicago was cut short with the announcement that Harriett had once again reconciled with Bert and wanted her child back home, a request that Esther granted very reluctantly.

The reconciliation ended almost as soon as it began. There wasn’t going to be another one. Harriett filed for divorce again. “This time it will stick”, she vowed in a newspaper interview on the divorce, borrowing a phrase usually identified in Hollywood with reconciliation. With no meddling judge to intercede, this time the divorce was granted. It marked the end of the marriage, but it would not be the end of the relationship. Harriett may not have had success as a wife, but she could be a friend for life.

Harriett and Dolores moved to an apartment on Reeves Drive in Beverly Hills. The one bedroom and kitchenette was soon shared with Aunt Betty, who had relocated to the West Coast to follow her boyfriend, Freddy Cocozza, who was now pursuing a singing career.

Betty was my love when she lived with us. She had beautiful black eyes and shoulder-length hair that bounced when she walked. She was one of the best playmates I ever had. She tried to be stern, but whenever I didn’t obey she would scoop me up and throw me, fully clothed, into the bathtub, turn the water on and shriek with laughter.

But somehow, no matter what Mommy and Aunt Betty did, I felt lost, uncertain. Divorce, remarriage and redivorce left me angry—not unwanted, but lonely. I remember Mommy bought a picture and hung it over my bed. It was a picture of a small boy carrying a large round globe. She told me it was Jesus and the globe he was carrying was the world. I thought to myself, “That’s not the world; that kid just has a fancy basketball.” Still, I would stare at the picture, maybe out of a real desire to believe, and little by little, I wasn’t so alone. If that kid could carry such a burden, maybe I could too.
Bert would come back on numerous occasions—always uninvited and usually drunk—presumably to see Dolores. Harriett would complain that he came back just to quarrel with her. But she would always let him in. If he had been drinking, she would put Dolores in the bedroom and close the door.

When he would come back he was awful to Mommy. She never said anything bad about him to me, but I could see she was afraid of him.

Aunt Betty, who always sided with my mother whenever Daddy was around, said she thought I was a remarkably well-adjusted little girl in spite of the fact that my family life had not been a good environment. It was the first time I had heard that word, in-vire-ment. I didn’t know what it meant. Must be something awful, I thought.

On our first Christmas Eve alone, Daddy came by dressed in a Santa suit and very drunk. Mommy wouldn’t let him in, so he stood banging on the door, yelling and singing Christmas songs. He was making such a fool of himself in front of the neighbors that she was more embarrassed than frightened. She grabbed me, put me in the bedroom and opened the front door.

Fortunately Betty was there, for once inside Bert’s holiday boisterousness turned menacing. Dolores could hear him bullying her mother while both women tried in vain to reason with him. She crept out of her hiding place and saw Bert holding a knife, threatening to use it on Harriett. Betty was trying to take the weapon away from him when the six-year-old child, crying, spoke to her father.

—I told him to give Aunt Betty the knife because what he was doing was not good.

Bert surrendered the knife. But the row continued. Clapping her hands over her ears to shut out the ugliness, Dolores hid in a closet and wrote a short letter to her grandmother: “Can I come to live with you? This is not a good invirement for a little girl to be in.”