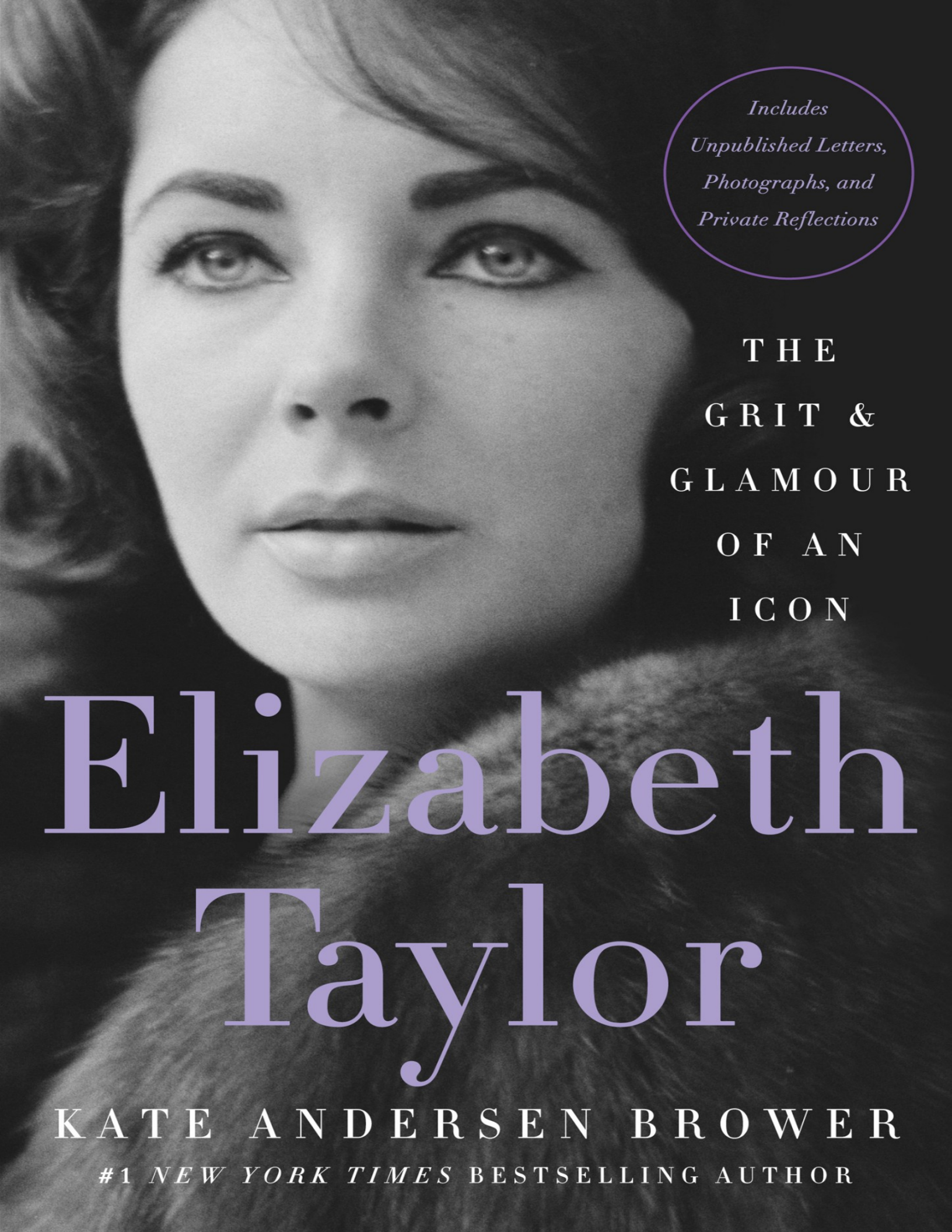
Includes Unpublished Letters, Photographs, and Private Reflections
THE GRIT & GLAMOUR OF AN ICON
Elizabeth Taylor
KATE ANDERSEN BROWER
#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Elizabeth Taylor

THE GRIT & GLAMOUR OF AN ICON

KATE ANDERSEN BROWER

HARPER
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Dedication

For Senator John Warner,
who wanted this story to be told
&
For Charlotte,
my very own fierce and exuberant girl

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Eddie Fisher (1959–1964)
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Prologue

There are no coincidences and nothing happens without a reason—I will find it.

—LETTER FROM ELIZABETH TAYLOR TO RICHARD BURTON

ROME
1987

The most photographed movie star in the world stood alone on the terrace of the Villa Papa, a ten-thousand-square-foot Roman mansion at 448 Via Appia Pignatelli. The early afternoon light lit up her raven hair, and those legendary blue eyes—that some swore were actually an otherworldly shade of violet—peered out onto the villa's eight acres, with its lush gardens, crystal clear pool, and tennis court. Elizabeth knew the house's current occupant, the celebrated director Franco Zeffirelli, very well. This was the home where she had lived during the filming of the 1963 epic *Cleopatra*, where she began her passionate, all-consuming romance with her costar Richard Burton. At that moment, as she leaned over the balcony railing, she wished she could be standing anywhere else in the world. But something kept her there.

Her friend Aprile Millo, an opera singer who was in Rome with Elizabeth helping her prepare for her role in Zeffirelli's latest film, assumed that Elizabeth was reveling in technicolor memories of Richard Burton, the man she had married twice. Richard had died three years earlier, and even though they had divorced long before his death, the two talked almost every day on the phone.

Elizabeth walked through the primary suite and out onto the terrace. She turned back toward Millo and asked, “Can you give me a second, please?” After a few minutes, she walked back inside and seemed lost in her thoughts. Millo did not realize that this was also the home Elizabeth had shared with the singer Eddie Fisher, whom she was married to before Richard, and the place where she and Richard had been hounded by the press at a time when much of the world viewed her as a homewrecker. The house represented a time in her life before the darkness gave way to the light.

In the 1960s, Elizabeth and Richard had practically invented the paparazzi, the term for the aggressive Roman freelance photographers who became famous in Federico Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita*. Everyone knew the story: Elizabeth stole Eddie Fisher away from his wife, the actress Debbie Reynolds, and then she set her sights on Richard, whom she stole from *his* wife, Sybil Burton. Of course, it was not quite as simple as that.

Images flashed through Elizabeth’s mind of being trapped inside the villa and hearing the photographers’ ladders hitting its outside walls as they tried to get a photo of her through a window. She thought of the day when a photographer knocked on the front door pretending to be a priest, or another time when a photographer posed as a plumber. There were death threats against her children. One paparazzo punched her in the stomach to try to get a reaction and a higher price for the photograph. Nothing, it seemed, was sacred. One of their dogs was even stolen—and later returned.

Eventually, plainclothes officers guarded the villa whenever she was there and uniformed police officers walked the grounds as though she were living in a fortress. And no one, it seemed, was deserving of trust without proving themselves first. A publicist on *Cleopatra* used to wear her hair in an elaborate updo until it was discovered that she was hiding a small camera in her chignon when she visited the set. Before the police got involved, one of Elizabeth’s assistants had opened the front door and slammed it shut as soon as they saw a camera lens trained on them. Determined, the photographer on the other side tried to break the door down, and several people inside the house had to throw their backs against it to keep it shut. Memories of her children using rakes and water hoses to chase the paparazzi out of their garden came rushing back as she stood inside the house for the first time in two decades. Back then, she and Richard had tried to turn it into a fun game of cops and robbers so they

could mask the reality that they were actually being hunted. In the years that followed, Elizabeth had tried not to dwell on the damage done to her family—and to herself.

In an envelope marked "ET PERSONAL—DO NOT OPEN" there is a private letter. It is from Elizabeth's archives, part of a meticulously catalogued collection of 7,358 letters, diary entries, articles, and personal notes, and 10,271 photographs. The letter tells the story of that day in 1987 when she went to visit Villa Papa. It is addressed to Richard Burton, who died in 1984, when he was fifty-eight years old. By that point in her life, she had married five other men and would marry once more.

"Richard, my always, forever love, This is really just for me, maybe you can hear and feel my soul," she writes, "I think you probably always can, I think you are aware of everything that goes on in this odd brain of mine. It's always filled with you, but, of course, sometimes more than others. Right now, I am brimming with you, you so pervade my thoughts and my very inner mood that it's like you are in me. I have you, but holy God I don't! I'm not really bitching because I am one of the most fortunate women in the world—to love you and have you love me in return. But God, I miss your arms, your eyes that told me so many things, your voice that taught me to understand and appreciate so many fantastic and yes unknown things to me. I want your body next to mine tonight. I need you to hold me fast and hard and tender."

It is so much more than a love letter. It is a rare and deep plunge inward for a woman who did not believe in doing much soul-searching during her seventy-nine years of rapid-fire love and loss. One marriage ended because of physical abuse, another because of a plane crash, and yet another fell victim to alcoholism. Her two marriages to Richard would haunt her forever.

"Oh God. Richard, I loved you so and I will love you for the rest of my life, just let me say it to you and please hear my heart—I love you, I love you, I love you and I thank God for you. Please God, let him know. And please God . . . allow me to forgive myself for some of the cruelties I was responsible for (and had so neatly tucked away) and let me make my amends to those I have caused such pain to."

But she would not have taken back those mistakes. "Without a sense of guilt and shame," she said, "I don't think one would be nearly as

compassionate or understanding." And compassion is what would later come to define her life.

* * *

Elizabeth had weathered so many storms, and standing in that villa in Rome brought some of the worst of them back. There was nothing but devastation in the wake of the sudden death of her magnetic super-producer husband Mike Todd, who was killed in a plane crash in 1958. Feeling half dead, she fell into the arms of Eddie Fisher, who happened to be Mike Todd's best friend. Fisher was married to the actress Debbie Reynolds at the time, and he was one half of America's storybook couple. The scandal was the top story in *Time*, *Life*, and *Newsweek* in their September 22, 1958, issues. The *Life* headline read: "TALE OF DEBBIE, EDDIE AND THE WIDOW TODD."

Then came *Cleopatra*, and she and Fisher, who were newly married, moved with her children to Rome. It was there, on January 22, 1962, on the set of the most expensive movie ever made at the time (it cost $44 million in 1963, the equivalent of $415 million today, and it remained the most expensive film for the next thirty years), that she started shooting scenes with the rakishly handsome Welsh actor Richard Burton, who was thirty-six years old. He had piercing blue-green eyes and pockmarks from bouts of childhood acne growing up in a Welsh coal-mining town. He was also married and well known for his habit of seducing his leading ladies. Elizabeth was on the cusp of thirty and at the height of her raw, smoldering sensuality.

Richard had cheated before, but he always went back to his wife. This time, with Elizabeth, it would be different.

* * *

In 1987, when she pulled up to Zeffirelli's opulent villa, Elizabeth, now fifty-five years old, knew that something was wrong. She thought she was going to a different house, the one she had shared with Richard when they were married and filming 1967's *The Taming of the Shrew*. She called that house "The Happy House." Instead, she found herself standing in "The House of Pain." The rooms had an "awful, heavy, humid, before-the-storm atmosphere," she wrote. The Villa Papa was along the Appian Way, a road

constructed in 312 BC to transport military supplies and Roman troops to southeast Italy. Still visible along the Via Appia Antica are indentations from chariots and parts of the same roads that St. Peter and Julius Caesar walked along. Before she set foot inside, Elizabeth turned to Millo and said, "I know this house very well."

Elizabeth wrote that 7-page handwritten letter to Richard in scrawling cursive on yellow legal paper. It looks like someone was emptying their emotions out in a hurry. Her brain, she wrote, "started flashing and sounds started popping in my head . . . letting in too much light, then too much dark, and I could make out in all this a fight that had taken place some twenty-five years before, with blood, bodyguards, gardeners, and waiters wielding rakes, planks of wood, pots and pans, hoses against the P [paparazzi], armed with anything they could get their hands on and those god damn cameras—trespassing, breaking and entering right in the front door and those awful sounds screaming down 25 years of a fun house slide with the echo of my babies fear still shrieking and howling behind that same door—closed now, and safe, just as they are and just as I will be when my beloved Franco opens the doors of 1987."

Being there, in the house, was a gut-wrenching shock, "like some awful mixed-up macabre joke," she wrote. "I thought I was going to the house we rented during *The Taming of the Shrew*, the house Franco had spent so much time in, and that we had been so happy in. When I heard Franco had bought our old house, I naturally thought it was that one—and I was not at all apprehensive about seeing it. God, it held so many wonderful memories. Liza [Elizabeth's daughter with Mike Todd] riding on Pipo the donkey, the time the cat climbed too far up the tree, peed all over you, and as you finally grabbed him and threw him down, both the butler and I who had been holding the ladder let go to chase after the cat and leave you to fall out of the tree, and like an arrow finding its mark the end of the ladder with unerring accuracy found my running head and knocked me out. Your sprained ankle, scratched hands, my numbed skull and . . . [the] cat licking his mitts and straightening out his ruffled dignity—Oh God we laughed! . . . I started to think about the other house, and I can't write anymore tonight—I had no idea there is still so much pain in me. . . . I didn't realize how much I have buried, and now I have to let it out so that I can try and learn from it all."

She lived in the Villa Papa during the end of her marriage to Eddie Fisher, which she described as a "slow suicide." In an unpublished interview, Elizabeth talked about the trauma of their years together. Toward the end, Fisher was using shocking means to try to control and manipulate her, and there were times when he would sit up all night with a gun by his side. "I'd take a sleeping pill to try and just fall off and forget it and go to sleep and he wouldn't let me. Every time I'd start to close my eyes and nod off, he'd stroke my arm and say, 'I'm not going to kill you. I wouldn't shoot you. You're much too pretty.' All night long. And then I'd stagger off and go to work. And come home to it. And he'd be unshaven and in his pajamas. And I'd go through the whole thing again at night time. And I ended up like a screaming lunatic . . . he used to tell me that I was his mother and that I couldn't leave him."

Elizabeth was one of the most famous celebrities in the world, but alone with her memories she was like anyone else, trying to figure out why fate had brought her there. She was writing for herself, for her children, and for Richard. It was Richard and Mike Todd, who was her third husband and her other great love, who had abandoned her with no warning. "You and Mike made me go on living without you . . . you bastard you married Sally when I had pneumonia and couldn't go on stage that night and half the audience left and rather than play to a half-empty theater you got drunk, flew to Vegas and got married. You son of a bitch, you know we should and would have married three times. But that was near the end—Via Pignatelli [Villa Papa] was near the beginning, the real beginning."

* * *

Decades after that visit in 1987, propped up in bed by plush pillows in her primary suite on the second floor of her Bel Air home, Elizabeth still could not escape Richard's memory. She wanted it that way. She made sure that night-blooming jasmine was planted near her terrace, so that she could open her bedroom window and bring back memories of Richard and their escapes to their home in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico.

"I smelled Richard," she said in a quiet voice. "It was like he was there."

Her garden provided a peaceful sanctuary, but there were many days when Elizabeth did not leave her bedroom suite. "I decided that if I'm

going to be sick, then I'm going to have a gorgeous bedroom," she said in 1997. It was her favorite room in the house, and it was decorated in shades of blue and white. She had a canopy bed with Pratesi and D. Porthault sheets. When she went to the hospital—which was quite often—she took her pillows, and sometimes those expensive sheets, along with her.

Her visit to Zeffirelli's house took her by surprise because, unlike the wafts of jasmine that made their way up to her bedroom suite, the bad times came creeping in. Maybe fate brought her there to help her say good-bye to Richard one last time.

Later that night in her hotel room in Rome in 1987, she wrote the letter to Richard and drank a Brandy Alexander, even though she was on the wagon. Then, she did what she always did: She got on with it.

Introduction

Elizabeth the First

Elizabeth never thought of herself as being larger than life. And how could she? She could not remember a time when she was not famous. In 1944, when she was twelve years old, she played the lead in *National Velvet* and became a heroine to girls around the world. She was the last star created by the Hollywood studio system, and her global fame is rivaled only by a handful of other women: Jackie Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe, and Queen Elizabeth II. Jackie (who was fascinated by Elizabeth) withdrew into a private world, Marilyn collapsed under the pressure, and the Queen was buffered by the walls of Buckingham Palace. Elizabeth, by contrast, flourished. In 1963, when Elizabeth was just thirty-one years old, *The New Yorker* magazine's film critic Brendan Gill noted that she was "less an actress by now than a great natural wonder, like Niagara or the Alps."

She made fifty-six films and ten television movies over nearly sixty years, but her lust for life has eclipsed her professional accomplishments. She was famous, even infamous, for her eight marriages to seven different men. By the time she was twenty-six, she was twice divorced and once widowed. Her stardom was organic and so much a part of who she was. Long after she stopped acting, the drama surrounding her personal life was on display on magazine covers at every supermarket checkout counter in the world. But beneath the psychic clutter of her own mythology was a bawdy woman, quick to laughter and self-deprecation. Her life was a soap opera that ended in a deeply meaningful way.

She was an early influencer and the original multihyphenate. She was the first to do so many things: she played daring roles, like Maggie the Cat, who voiced the suspicion of homosexuality, a verboten topic in the 1950s; she was the first actor, male or female, to negotiate a million-dollar contract, when she appeared in the epic film *Cleopatra*; she was the first celebrity to get treatment for her addiction to alcohol and drugs at the Betty Ford Center; she was the first major star to use her fame to change the course of history through her bold and defiant HIV and AIDS activism; and she was among the first celebrities to create her own massively successful perfume line. Elizabeth was a "lady boss," long before the term was popular.

Still, she never saw herself the way other people saw her. Truman Capote described his first impressions of Elizabeth: "Like Mrs. Onassis, her legs are too short for the torso, the head too bulky for the figure in toto; but the face, with those lilac eyes, is a prisoner's dream, a secretary's self-fantasy; unreal, non-obtainable, at the same time shy, overly vulnerable, very human, with the flicker of suspicion constantly flaring behind the lilac eyes." She also shared Jackie's clear signs of post-traumatic stress disorder. Jackie sat beside her husband when he was shot to death in 1963 when she was just thirty-four years old. Five years earlier, in 1958, Elizabeth was twenty-six years old when her husband, Mike Todd, died suddenly in a plane crash and left her alone with three young children to care for.

"I don't want any surprises," she instructed her manager later in life. She had had too many that had left her reeling.

J. D. Salinger once called Elizabeth, who had indigo-blue eyes, which were often mistaken for violet, sable hair, porcelain skin, and a perfect profile, "the most beautiful creature I have ever seen in my life." The photographer Bob Willoughby chronicled the lives of movie stars of Elizabeth's era, including Audrey Hepburn and Marilyn Monroe. "He loved Audrey and he was friends with her, but he was truly staggered by Elizabeth's raw beauty," said Willoughby's son Chris. "Once, he was standing close to her and he was looking into her eyes, which were just glowing, and he forgot to pick up his camera."

But in 1964, when she was thirty-two years old, Elizabeth described how she actually saw herself: "I think Ava Gardner is truly beautiful; I think my daughter Liza is. I think Jacqueline Kennedy is a beautiful woman—tremendous dignity. I am pretty enough . . . I'm too short of leg, too big in

the arms, one too many chins, nose a bit crooked, big feet, big hands, I'm too fat. My best feature is my gray hairs." Other times she cited Lena Horne and Katharine Hepburn as true beauties; she never counted herself among them, even in her private, unguarded moments.

What she saw when she woke up every morning and looked in the mirror, she said, was a face that needed washing. Liza Minnelli knew Elizabeth well, and she said that she was never awestruck by Elizabeth's beauty—and neither was her mother. "Mama [Judy Garland] knew 'em all. They were all gorgeous. But the thing about Elizabeth is that she looked like she didn't know that she was beautiful. And that could be an act, but I believed it, and you know I can figure things out like that because of mama."

But at the same time, Elizabeth could never deny her glamour. She admitted, "I don't pretend to be an ordinary housewife." And the public did not want her to be. They wanted to see diamonds dripping from her neck as she traveled around the world in her yacht on the arms of a different man every few years (or less). Her life scintillated and fascinated, and it offered a reprieve for the normal housewife, and she knew it. She also knew that her beauty was a double-edged sword; people sometimes underestimated her because of it. But she was shrewd and sophisticated, and she knew a good script instinctively. She was most proud of her work in the critically acclaimed films *National Velvet*; *Father of the Bride*; *A Place in the Sun*; *Giant*; *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*; *Suddenly, Last Summer*; *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*; and *Taming of the Shrew.* But some of her movies she made purely to finance her lavish lifestyle. By the late 1960s, she and Richard Burton had a combined fortune of almost $90 million in today's dollars.

Elizabeth was a committed actress, even though people too often doubted her. September 15, 1965, was a cold, moonlit night near the campus of Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, where Elizabeth and Richard were on location shooting *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* In the film Elizabeth plays Martha, a bitter and domineering middle-aged college professor's wife. In one key scene in a parking lot outside a bar she tells her husband, George, played by Richard, that she is tired of whipping him, and George seethes and calls her sick. "I'll show you who is sick," Martha says, in what the film's producer Ernest Lehman described as an "absolutely blood-curdling" performance. In the scene, Martha tries to hit

George and George pushes her away so that, in real life, Elizabeth kept cracking the back of her head against the station wagon. Take after take after take.

"On one take it was so bad, that is the pain was so bad, that tears came to her eyes and she had to be led back to the roadhouse and the company doctor looked over her for a while," Lehman recalled. "Fortunately the wig provided some protection for her head and she came back and did it all over again so many times. Richard and Elizabeth were both so intent on giving the very best performances that they felt were in them, that even after Mike [Mike Nichols, the film's director] said, 'That's it. Thank you very much,' Elizabeth asked Mike to quickly shoot the scene once more because she felt she could do it better, and indeed she did."

People had undervalued her abilities as an actress, and though few dared to show it, Elizabeth was intuitive and she could feel it. In a late-night phone call in 1965, after they started filming *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Nichols told Ernest Lehman: "Here's what I think's going to happen. I think Sandy Dennis is going to be fine, I think George Segal is going to be fine, Richard is absolutely going to walk away with the picture, and everyone is going to say there never was a George like Richard Burton, but I just don't think Elizabeth is going to make it."

In the end, it was Elizabeth who won the Academy Award for her performance; Richard did not.

* * *

She was a lot of things: kind, creative, whip-smart, self-indulgent, empathetic, selfish, greedy, romantic, vulnerable, and childlike. "Elizabeth wasn't a movie star with you, except when she'd suddenly act like it, like going to Studio 54," recalled Liza Minnelli. "Then she'd sit down at a beautiful booth that was hers, and Steve Rubell [co-owner of the legendary disco], through Halston [the designer], would find out who should be in that booth too so she was comfortable." She was not judgmental, and though she was always one of the beautiful people, and surrounded by the best of everything, she could not tolerate snobs, so that meant she wanted someone at her table who could make her laugh, not just someone who was famous.

Actors have to be vulnerable and in touch with their emotions in order to do their jobs, but they must also develop a thick skin so they can handle

the criticism and rejection that comes with the territory. Elizabeth had been working for so long that she had learned how to build up her defenses when she was just a child. She refused to be cowed by anyone. Sometimes, with self-important people—but men in particular—she'd take great pleasure in putting them in their place. Her son Chris Wilding called her self-confidence "a splendid thing to behold."

"She moved through life as a spontaneous being, not as someone who overanalyzed or regretted past actions," he said. "She burned with a brilliant flame. I also think that is one of the reasons that her important and lasting romantic relationships were with men who could stand up to her, who were her equal in charisma and wattage, men like Mike Todd and Richard, whose mojo she felt eclipsed her own."

She demanded loyalty and she gave it in return. Months after Elizabeth and Eddie Fisher ended their marriage, and while he was feeding the frenzy surrounding Elizabeth and Richard, she still cared enough about him to save his life. Elizabeth's mother, Sara, was staying with Elizabeth at her chalet in Gstaad, Switzerland when the phone rang in the middle of the night. She picked up the receiver so that it would not wake Elizabeth, because she had to be up before dawn for work.

"Hello," Sara said groggily. But there was silence on the other end. "*Hello*," she repeated.

Finally, Fisher shouted, "*Put Elizabeth on the phone!*"

"She's fast asleep," Sara told him. "It's two a.m. here."

But Fisher was insistent. "*Put her on the phone*."

"I'll wake her at five in the morning. Call back then, Eddie."

Before she could hang up he screamed: "*That's too late!* I've got to have two hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars immediately or I'll be killed by some men here in Las Vegas for an overdue gambling debt."

It had been five months since their divorce, and Sara was unmoved. "Call her in the morning, Eddie," and she hung up.

The next morning when the phone rang, Elizabeth answered. She agreed to pay the $225,000, the equivalent of $1.9 million today. She cared enough about him to do that, even after he had demolished her in the press at the same time that she was taking a beating from the critics over *Cleopatra*. She would not abandon him completely. Not when his life was at stake.

She never let her friends down either. When Lehman suggested that she ask a friend, who was an accomplished assistant director, if he would

consider leaving his job on one project to work on *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, she was happy to do it, and her friend was delighted by the offer. But she was livid when Lehman told her that she would have to rescind it because Mike Nichols had changed his mind. "What you asked me to do," she said during a heated phone call with Lehman, "is not very nice to *do* to a person. . . . *You bet your ass I'm angry!* . . . you just don't treat human beings like that." If her friend had been famous, she suspected, he would not have been treated so cavalierly.

She could not stand the veneer of authority, of religion, or anything that's supposed to be worshipped or put on a pedestal. She believed in asking questions. Above all, she was authentic; she had a wonderful vulnerability about her. And she was a survivor who went through more than forty surgeries over the course of her life.

Elizabeth led the most glamorous and colorful life of any movie star in the world. She lived decades longer than Marilyn Monroe, the only other actress who approaches her phenomenal level of fame. Richard Burton wrote in his diary that he saw people actually "shiver" when they walked across a room to be introduced to Elizabeth. Her public life was defined by excess. Her motto was always *More is more.*

She was *excessively* married. She was *excessively* rich, in part because she knew how valuable she was to the movie studios, and she demanded to be paid what she was worth. She was *excessively* in love with extravagant jewelry (she had the most valuable private jewelry collection in the world, which included the Asscher-cut, 33.19-carat Krupp diamond and an enormous 51-carat pear-shaped pearl called La Peregrina, which was once owned by King Philip II of Spain). She packed *excessively*, rarely traveling with fewer than twenty-five pieces of luggage stuffed with dozens of nightgowns, fur coats, cocktail dresses, and handbags, and she was *excessively* late, almost always arriving hours after she was supposed to.

Barbara Davis, whose late husband, Marvin, was once head of 20th Century Fox, remembers sitting and waiting with Nancy Reagan for Elizabeth to walk down the aisle to marry Larry Fortensky, her last husband, at Michael Jackson's Neverland Ranch.

"Valentino [the designer Valentino Garavani] would wait for hours," she recalled. "Everyone waited for Elizabeth."

Most of all, though, Elizabeth was *excessively* empathetic. The word "empathy" comes from the German *Einfühlung*, or "in-feeling"—translated

first as “empathy” in 1909. It means mingling your own feelings and consciousness with someone else’s experience, which had always come naturally to Elizabeth. She instinctively understood the precariousness and fragility of life. She possessed what her stepdaughter Carrie Fisher called “rampant empathy.”

It is what led Elizabeth to devote the last three decades of her life to ending the stigma associated with HIV and AIDS, a disease that has disproportionately killed homosexuals, people of color, and drug users around the world. Elizabeth told the famous British broadcaster David Frost in 1972 that she had always considered acting to be “selfish.” “It gratifies your own personal ego,” she said. She wanted to do more with her life. When she declared, “I would rather be a good woman than a great actress,” she meant it with every fiber of her being. And she knew that she could never please all the critics.

Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary defines an icon as “a person or thing widely admired especially for having great influence or significance in a particular sphere.” Elizabeth never fit neatly into one sphere of influence—she was too big for that. She defined twentieth-century Hollywood for a global audience, both as an actress and as a cultural figure who, with each decade, reinvented herself to fit into a new generation. In the 1960s, she and Richard Burton were outlaws who captivated the world with their passionate and extravagant lifestyle, and at the same time she honed her skills as a serious actress, giving two Oscar-winning performances. In the 1970s, she tried out the role of Washington wife, and she occasionally indulged in the hedonistic nightlife of Studio 54. And in the 1980s, she built her unparalleled celebrity perfume empire and called out the cruelty and hypocrisy of the far right and the apathetic left in her fight to end HIV and AIDS and the pervasive and poisonous homophobia that it had exposed. It was during the 1990s and the 2000s that Elizabeth decided what mattered most in her life as a public figure: she was an activist first, a businesswoman second, and an actress last.

By the time she appeared in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in 1958, Elizabeth was already a secular saint. She represented hedonism and scandal, captivating beauty and pain, love and lust. She understood what she symbolized, and throughout her life there were times when she leaned into the world’s caricature of a wildly self-indulgent movie star, a parody of herself that had reached its apex during her marriage to Richard Burton.

There were times, too, when she refused to fulfill anyone's idea of who she was; she grew tired of their misconceptions. In her 1964 book, *Elizabeth Taylor: An Informal Memoir*, Elizabeth wrote, "I am disgusted by the amount of myth that now is accepted as fact." In her autobiography she seeks to set the record straight, but unfortunately she does not reveal too much of herself; she had become so accustomed to guarding her privacy that even her attempts to correct people's assumptions are self-censored.

The book is a winding conversation between Elizabeth and the journalist Richard Meryman. She comes across as intelligent and thoughtful and entirely self-aware, but she remains determined to keep her private world to herself while still offering some revelations, including pulling the curtain back on the painful isolation of child stardom. In 1977, more than a decade after her memoir was published, she wrote this note to herself: "I was born a baby—I have lived a very full and rich life, of which I will go into later at great detail. As I am still living it is my story to tell and no one else's." She never let go of her agency, though that meant that she never wrote a full account of her marvelous life.

Unpublished interview transcripts that Meryman compiled for the book reveal much more. In one 1964 interview with him that was never published, Elizabeth said: "Nobody has the right to despise me that doesn't know me because they're despising an image that's been concocted by hundreds of other people, so they have no right to either approve or disapprove because they have no way of knowing whether it's true or false."

Separating herself from people's perception of her offered a level of protection from public scrutiny—of which there was always plenty. "I don't give a damn about what people think about me. I live my life the way I want to live my life, I'm responsible to and for people that I love."

Elizabeth was acutely aware that she was a uniquely valuable commodity; she understood that in order to survive in Hollywood she had to create space between the person she really was and the person the studio had created. "Elizabeth Taylor, the famous one, really has no depth or meaning to me," she said. "It's totally superficial. . . . I don't know what the ingredients are. It makes money. One is flesh and blood and one is cellophane." But she fiercely guarded its value. When she was in Rome shooting *Cleopatra*, a publicist asked her which photographs she approved for publication (she had insisted on having photo approval). She took a pair

of scissors off her dressing-room table and cut the ones she did not like into shreds "by way of making herself better understood, presumably," the publicist recalled. She, and no one else, controlled her image.

She understood her value. "She could make fun of herself," her friend and assistant of two decades, Tim Mendelson, said. "But the commodity of Elizabeth Taylor she fought tooth and nail for." At the time, Macy's was the premiere department store for a fragrance launch, and if her partners were placing her signature perfume anywhere else, she would demand otherwise.

Maintaining the value of Elizabeth Taylor the brand empowered her to help other people. Mendelson recalled one instance in the early 1990s when Elizabeth told him that she had read a newspaper article that had deeply disturbed her. It was a story about a woman and her young son who had been living out of their car and who were left homeless when their car was stolen. *Find this woman*, she told Mendelson, *buy her a new car, give her money for essentials, rent her an apartment for one year, and find a good school for her son.* And she didn't want anyone to know who was behind it. Mendelson said that this act of generosity was not an uncommon request; Elizabeth wanted to help people who needed it most, and she had the means to help them because she had safeguarded her celebrity so expertly.

Elizabeth came into her full power in midlife, during a rare time when she was not married. In 1985, when she was fifty-three years old, she chaired AIDS Project Los Angeles's Commitment to Life fundraiser, which was the first major celebrity AIDS fundraiser in the world. She pressured then president Ronald Reagan into making his first speech devoted exclusively to the AIDS pandemic in 1987, six years after the first cases were reported in the United States. Trailblazer does not even begin to cut it.

She is well known as a founder of amfAR, the Foundation for AIDS Research, which was the first major nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting research on AIDS. But the extreme and heroic lengths that she went to privately to acquire illegal treatments to save her friends' lives, and also the life of her former daughter-in-law, who is living with HIV—her humanity and empathy toward people who she had never met before—is astonishing.

She raised hundreds of millions of dollars for research and patient care over the course of her life. Dr. Anthony Fauci, who was the country's leading expert on the virus in its early days, recalled what it was like

working with Elizabeth. “She was a little lady!” he said, referring to her five-foot-two frame. “But she was ferocious.”

Elizabeth reveled in speaking truth to power. At the 8th International AIDS Conference in 1992, she called out President George H. W. Bush for a ban against HIV-positive people entering the United States. “I don’t think President Bush is doing anything at all about AIDS,” she said at a crowded press conference. “In fact I’m not even sure if he knows how to spell AIDS.” The next day her rebuke was headline news around the world.

Many of her closest friends were gay men, including Rock Hudson, Montgomery Clift, James Dean, and Roddy McDowall, whom she became close to in 1943 when they were in *Lassie Come Home* together. Gay men had been a constant source of friendship and love in her life. “No one had explained it to me, but I knew it,” she said. “Monty [Montgomery Clift] was in the closet, and I think I knew what he was fighting. He was tormented his whole life. I tried to explain to him that it wasn’t awful. It was the way that nature had made him.”

When she accepted the Jean Hersholt Humanitarian Award at the Oscars in 1993, she wore an HIV and AIDS Awareness pin made of rubies and gold attached to a butter-yellow Valentino dress, with a stunning daisy diamond and chrysoprase necklace and earrings by Van Cleef & Arpels.

“I accept this award in honor of all the men, women, and children with AIDS who are waging incredibly valiant battles for their lives, those to whom I have given my commitment, the real heroes of the pandemic of AIDS,” she said. “I will remain here as rowdy an activist as I have to be, and God willing for as long as I have to be.”

Fighting for gay rights at a time when being gay was a felony in many states, including California, and fighting on behalf of HIV and AIDS patients, gave her life meaning and became her salvation when she was no longer acting. Tabloids had always made money off her, and she had no way to control whether what they printed was truth or fiction. Here was a way that she could do something important—and control the narrative. “If you’re famous there’s so many good things you can do,” Elizabeth said. “If you do something worthwhile you feel better. I spent my whole last fifty years protecting my privacy. I resented my fame until I realized I could use it.”

* * *

People around her always knew that she was destined for more than movie stardom. Her second husband, the handsome British actor Michael Wilding, was struck by her courage. “I think the most important thing about Elizabeth is that she is very brave. Brave about actual physical things, afraid of no person and no animal, nor of any illness that may affect her person. And apart from physical dangers, illnesses, and such, she is undismayed by life.” She almost died several times, including one famous battle with double pneumonia in 1961 that led to a tracheotomy—an incision made in her throat so that she could breathe. When she won an Oscar that year, she did not wear a bandage, so that the world could see what she had survived. Her brushes with death only added to her allure. Unlike Marilyn Monroe and Judy Garland, Elizabeth had come back from the dead, like a phoenix. And like the protagonist in Sylvia Plath’s poem “Lady Lazarus,” when Elizabeth came back from the brink of death in 1961 she vowed to reclaim her life and fight against the people who had objectified her. “Out of the ash,” Plath wrote, “I rise with my red hair. And I eat men like air.” The studio executives who once sought to control Elizabeth would not stand a chance.

In 1975, when she was forty-three years old, she had already lived a lifetime: two broken engagements, five husbands—the death of one of them affected her for the rest of her life—pneumonia too many times to count, a couple of international scandals, a broken foot, a twisted colon, three ruptured spinal discs, acute bronchitis, chemical thrombosis, phlebitis, sciatica, double pneumonia, a tracheotomy, three C-sections, and several alleged suicide attempts. “I’ve been through it all, baby,” she said. “I’m Mother Courage. I’ll be dragging my sable coat behind me into old age.”

By the time she was sixty-five she’d had brain surgery to remove a benign tumor, and she’d been through back, eye, knee, and foot surgery, a partial hysterectomy, adult measles, dysentery, and three hip operations. And that is in addition to two visits to the Betty Ford Center, where she went to face her addiction to pills and alcohol. Such close encounters with her own mortality made her unafraid of death, but she was always fearful of physical pain.

She had been through such mental anguish. The deep resounding love she had for Mike Todd and Richard Burton came with soul-crushing loss. But she channeled her agony into something righteous. “I think the level of

compassion she had is parallel to the level of pain she experienced," said her friend Demi Moore.

* * *

Elizabeth grew up in the Hollywood studio system, where an actor's life was controlled by executives. She was under contract with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) for seventeen and a half years, from 1943's *Lassie Come Home* to 1960's *BUtterfield 8*, and at least on the surface, she handled the overbearing influence of her mother and the emotional abuse of the studio with grace.

She was born with scoliosis, a double curvature of the spine, and her chronic and sometimes debilitating back pain, which was exacerbated when she was thrown off her horse while shooting *National Velvet*, never left her. So much of her life was defined by her early years as a contract player. As a valuable object, her every whim was catered to and her every sickness became worldwide news. "She was a living, breathing chemistry set," said one friend. She learned that being sick was sometimes the only way she could get out of working, or get the attention of her family and the studio. When she was ill, she was a person and not a commodity. But she knew deep down that all the studio really cared about was money. "She could play Dracula's daughter and still draw crowds," MGM cofounder Louis B. Mayer said of Elizabeth's box-office earnings.

"She knew how to get attention one way or another. The best way to get it was to walk out onstage and be this incredible character," said her one-time boyfriend George Hamilton. "The other was to take to the bed and be ill. She could fulfill her needs by getting attention through self-inflicted wounds." Her mental state, Elizabeth admitted, was deeply connected to her physical well-being.

It is not easy to feel sorry for a woman who had every material possession imaginable, from a 69-carat diamond ring to a yacht to a green Rolls-Royce, but even Andy Warhol, who surrounded himself with celebrities and studied fame, found Elizabeth's magnitude of celebrity jarring. In a diary entry from April 29, 1986, he described an HIV and AIDS benefit at the Javits Center in New York. When Elizabeth walked in she was mobbed by fans and photographers.

Warhol's friend wondered out loud: "What do you have to do to be that famous?" Warhol watched as the mob "dragged her across the room and then all the photographers rushed at her and smothered her and crushed her and when they had used her up, they just dumped her and she was left standing there, alone, they'd gotten what they wanted. It was so strange to see." Warhol had used her too, of course; the iconic series of portraits he made using a publicity photograph of Elizabeth from *Suddenly, Last Summer* was a jewel-toned representation of female celebrity and had helped make him famous.

Elizabeth knew that actresses, especially the ones known for their looks, had short shelf lives in Hollywood. She knew that her youth and beauty were ephemeral, and she wondered what would happen to her when they were gone. A 1949 *Life* cover story examined the rush to sign young actors. "One studio that is less desperate than most is Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer [*sic*]," the story read. "That is partly because MGM has already turned up a jewel of great price, a true star sapphire. She is Elizabeth Taylor. . . . At 17, 5 ft., 4 ½ in. [she was really 5 ft., 2 in.], 112 lbs, Elizabeth Taylor is a great beauty."

Her wariness of being used and her exuberance when she was in the presence of her true friends were all born from those days as a young girl who wanted, more than anything, to please her perfectionistic mother. Elizabeth's granddaughter Laela Wilding remembered watching *National Velvet* with her grandmother.

"At one point Grandma paused it and said, 'We had to redo this scene because my mother was watching from behind the camera. She didn't like the way I was holding something because she thought that my hand looked fat.'" That was nothing compared to the years of taunting by Joan Rivers and skits on *Saturday Night Live* making fun of her fluctuating weight. "That's a lifetime of criticism and critique," Wilding reflected. "What does one have to do? You have to thicken your skin to survive, maybe prop up your own ego, maybe dull down some of the sensitivities."

"What a time to be a woman," said another one of Elizabeth's granddaughters, Naomi Wilding. "She had so many accolades, so much to admire, and yet to be constantly criticized for her appearance . . ."

The incessant attention was one reason why Elizabeth valued her privacy so much. "I don't have a lot of photographs of myself with Granny," said Naomi, who lived with Elizabeth in her Bel Air home from

2000 until 2002. “We didn’t take pictures because we understood that she wanted to present herself in a certain way. You took your picture when she was ready for it. And that was a total act of respect for her, understanding the scrutiny she faced. It needed to always be on her terms.”

* * *

Mike Todd and Richard Burton are referred to by their first names throughout the book because they are among the most defining figures in Elizabeth’s life, along with Sara and Francis Taylor, her parents, Debbie Reynolds, Montgomery Clift, Rock Hudson, and James Dean. Each marriage was a chance to reinvent herself. When she was Mrs. Nicky Hilton, she was a young, idealistic actress; when she was Mrs. Michael Wilding, she was a woman looking for shelter; when she was Mrs. Mike Todd, she was on an adventure of a lifetime; when she was Mrs. Eddie Fisher, she was trying to bring Mike back to life; when she was Mrs. Richard Burton, she was one half of the most famous celebrity couple of the twentieth century; when she was Mrs. John Warner, she tried to play the part of an obedient Washington wife; and when she was Mrs. Larry Fortensky, she was his teacher. She felt more secure when she was in a relationship, but in truth, she found her most powerful role when she was single.

She got the message so many of us never learn: Life is short and it should be lived to the fullest. Her friend John Travolta saw it up close: “She was unabashed about her feelings for her man—whoever that was at the time. She loved the man she fell in love with, and she didn’t hide it. The people who are real feminists are not making an effort to be feminists, they just are. When you are at that level you don’t have to exert anything—it’s effortless. You’re the woman who’s the best paid actress in the world, you’re the woman leading the AIDS movement, you’re the woman who’s married and has children and wins two Oscars for Best Actress. You just own it.”

Elizabeth had always believed in female agency, and she embraced the seismic shift of the 1960s, when women’s rights and civil rights were becoming central to American culture. In 1964, Elizabeth and Richard joined Sidney Poitier, Duke Ellington, Lena Horne, and other prominent civil rights activists at the National Association for the Advancement of

Colored People's (N.A.A.C.P.) "Freedom TV Spectacular." The nationally televised event commemorated the tenth anniversary of the Supreme Court's decision to outlaw the segregation of schools. The fundraiser was hosted by Ed Sullivan and Sammy Davis Jr. and raised funds to bail out civil rights demonstrators who were being arrested in the South. Elizabeth read a poem by Langston Hughes, a leader of the Harlem Renaissance. In 1970, she and Richard contributed to the Black Panther Legal Defense Fund, and her fight against the moral ostracism of HIV and AIDS patients in the 1980s was in keeping with her early adoption of norm-breaking ideas. These included her belief in the need for stricter gun control legislation in the United States. Decades before school shootings had begun to upend (and eventually shatter) Americans' sense of security and safety, Elizabeth took out a full-page ad in the *New York Times* calling for action after Robert F. Kennedy's assassination in 1968. And she used her influence to get one hundred other celebrities to sign it. After President Ronald Reagan was shot and almost killed in 1981 she placed another ad in favor of gun control in the national newspapers.

Elizabeth was intuitively a feminist; she questioned the patriarchy at every turn, from studio heads to presidents, and she understood that the life of a housewife and mother was not every woman's ideal. For Elizabeth there was no performative flaunting of her sexuality, but she was a harbinger of the cultural changes that were to come. Before there was the sexual liberation of the 1960s, Elizabeth had sexual autonomy. She was not making the kind of outward proclamations that came to define the feminists of the post–World War II baby boom generation; instead she was living her life as a powerful woman thriving in a man's world. Like the feminist leaders Bella Abzug, who was a friend and whose political career Elizabeth supported, and the activist and writer Betty Friedan, Elizabeth supported equal pay for equal work, access to birth control, and the end of sexual harassment and domestic violence. Feminists wanted to change archaic expectations, and Elizabeth was an example of a woman who pursued her passions, in her personal life and in her career. In Betty Friedan's 1963 bestseller, *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan observed: "The problem that has no name burst like a boil through the image of the happy American housewife." Not all women were content staying home and taking care of their house and family, and in Elizabeth they saw a woman who wanted

excitement and romance and who believed that everyone deserved to live their lives as they chose.

Perhaps it was because Elizabeth was forever being sized up and called out by people who had never even met her that she was so insistent on never judging anyone else. In 1963, one woman unleashed her fury at Elizabeth for leaving Eddie Fisher and falling in love with Richard Burton. The letter, which was addressed to the influential gossip columnist Hedda Hopper, is just one example of the onslaught of bitter criticism Elizabeth was getting at the time. The letter writer was a woman who seemed to resent Elizabeth for considering herself worthy of great love: "I am sure that these romances would not have progressed had Liz not done the encouraging, and when she saw what unhappiness she was causing she should have been the one to have ended the affairs. She has proved that the whole thing rests with her. There have been far greater women than she who had to give up love because it was the right thing to do."

Hopper replied two weeks later: "You are quite right," she wrote. "She [Elizabeth] has done more to degrade the women of this world than any mistress of any king, and still she is being accepted as a great beauty and actress. However, I do believe she is genuinely in love, if she can be in love after so many loves."

Elizabeth had made mistakes, like everyone, including trusting the wrong people and falling in love with the wrong men. She had regrets, but she refused to dwell on them, because she understood that every full life is full of regret. "The most awful thing of all," she said, "is to be numb." Her humanity is what defines her life: she could be weak, but she had courage; she could be self-consumed, but she could also be selfless. She celebrated the life of the senses. "With Richard Burton," she wrote, "I was living my own fabulous, passionate fantasy." She loved eating fried chicken and indulging in decadent desserts and caviar, drinking champagne and sipping Jack Daniel's, being gifted extravagantly expensive jewelry and making love.

Elizabeth and Richard were the first celebrity couple with their own nickname, well before "Brangelina," and would be known as "Liz and Dick" for the rest of their lives. Richard's brother, Graham Jenkins, remembered how the couple spoke almost every day, long after they divorced. "He couldn't live with her and he couldn't live without her." Even when they had both moved on, when she was married to Senator John

Warner and he was married to the British model Suzy Hunt, and later production assistant Sally Hay, he could not shake Elizabeth. “Elizabeth,” he’d say, “bring a drink for my brother.” Jenkins remembered cringing and having to remind Richard that that was *not* Elizabeth he was talking to.

“Yes,” Richard said with an apologetic smile, “of course. That woman’s always on my mind.”

Sally Burton’s perspective is quite different. It is clear that Elizabeth’s plan going into the 1983 stage production of *Private Lives*, in which she and Richard star as a divorced couple who run into each other on their respective honeymoons with new spouses, was to get back together with him.

“She thought it was a war she was going to win,” Sally Burton recalled. “Richard’s Welsh family told me that Elizabeth told them that she was going to get Richard back. She believed that they would get married a third time. She was not going to let it go.”

Elizabeth asked Richard not to marry Sally during the run of the Noël Coward play. But he married Sally anyway—maybe to spite her. “Elizabeth in a way let her intentions be known, she threw down the gauntlet and I picked it up,” Sally said in 2021.

The battle for Richard’s heart was as fresh as it had been four decades earlier.

* * *

Elizabeth was a strong, smart woman who stood up for herself and other people, someone who didn’t take any B.S.; someone with the lasting cultural relevance of a first lady, but who was more than a political spouse. She was someone who demanded to be the lead and not just a costar.

When she was married to Republican senator John Warner of Virginia, she was asked to join the 96th Congressional Wives Club. For years the Senate wives rolled bandages for the Red Cross and made puppets to give to children in area hospitals. It is difficult to imagine the most famous movie star of the twentieth century, a two-time Oscar winner draped in diamonds and emeralds, convincing herself to play a supporting role among the other Senate wives. But she tried.

The late John Warner, the last of Elizabeth’s seven husbands to pass away, talked about how much Elizabeth still meant to him even after her

death, and how badly he wanted the real story of her life to be told. From conversations with her four children, to the celebrities who knew her well, including her last celebrity crush, the actor Colin Farrell, people who were close to Elizabeth knew there was more to her than anyone understood.

Elizabeth always made more money than her husbands, and she came from an era when working mothers were extremely rare. She was a lioness who wanted to guard and protect so many people—mostly those she saw as outsiders—that sometimes her own children were left feeling neglected. Her children's lives were, as her second son, Chris Wilding, put it, "set to the rhythm of her life" more than they should have been. When they were very young and she was married to Richard Burton for the first time, the children knew to be quiet on weekend mornings, aware that their mother and stepfather were most likely nursing nasty hangovers.

Elizabeth always said that she was no typical housewife, even though sometimes that was the life she craved most of all. Chris Wilding described a trip he took with her to a cabin in the woods when she was in her late sixties, and the delight she had in visiting a truck stop to use the bathroom.

"It was one of those places that had, in addition to gas and a truck wash, a restaurant, a very elaborate mini mart, showers, and a chapel. And it was packed. I led her inside to the ladies' restroom, which had a fairly long queue backing up outside it. She gave me her handbag and Sugar (her dog) to hold, and I told her I would meet her in the market when she was done. I expected her to be awhile, so I tried to make myself invisible behind the tall displays of snacks—I felt I stuck out like a sore thumb in this bastion of burly Truckerdom, what with the handbag and wee fluffy designer doggie in my arms. Suddenly I heard her distinctive cackle/laugh rise above the din. I peered over my defensive snack tower to see her shaking hands and waving good-bye to some of the gals in the toilet queue. Upon recognizing her, they had of course let her jump the queue, and she was thanking her new friends on her way out."

When she joined him in the market, he said, she acted as though "she'd arrived at the gates of heaven." As she reached for bags of junk food, she exclaimed, "Let's get some of these! Oh, and we have to have a couple of these!" Soon the basket was overflowing. "For you and me, the experience of grocery shopping is a pretty perfunctory affair; get in, do the deed, and get out. Box ticked. For my mother, though, these were novel experiences, and even though I would inwardly roll my eyes at the way she elevated the

mundane to the ‘you don’t know how much fun this is,’ it did make me appreciate what she had missed out on—even if it was the mundane—in her sheltered, insulated life.”

She had an unmatched level of beauty, a raunchy sense of humor, and the ability to see beyond the bubble that she was placed in as a child. To Colin Farrell, who grew close to her during the last two years of her life, Elizabeth’s acting was a reflection of who she really was: “She was honest and raw and brutal and grotesque and feminine and delicate and aggressive and soft and tender and warm and acerbic. She was *limitless*.”