

The Friday Afternoon Club

A FAMILY MEMOIR



Griffin
Dunne

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Pictured: Griffin Dunne, Joan Didion Dunne, Asa Maynor, John Dunne, Lennie Dunne, Earl McGrath, Alex Dunne, John Irvin, Dominick Dunne. Front row: Quintana Dunne, Logan Byrnes, Dominique Dunne, Bozie the poodle.

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Some names and identifying characteristics have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

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To my brother, Alex, who was there through it all

It's very difficult to escape your background. You know, I don't think it's necessary to even try to escape it. More and more, I start to think that it's necessary to see exactly what it is that you inherited on both ends of the stick: your timidity, your courage, your self-deceit, and your honesty and all the rest of it.

—SAM SHEPARD

Hey, kiddo, what can I say?
I'm a work in progress.

—DOMINICK DUNNE

Prologue

At 3:00 a.m., during the early hours of Halloween 1982, Detective Harold Johnston of the West Hollywood Homicide Division rang the doorbell of my mother's house in the flats of Beverly Hills. Marina, her live-in housekeeper, woke to the sound and let the detective in. She expected she'd have to disturb Mrs. Dunne's sleep, but when she led Johnston into her bedroom, the lights were on and Mom was already sitting up in bed, bracing herself for news that is never good at that time of night.

The first thing that caught Johnston's eye was my mother's wheelchair. He was a tough Irish cop who'd made countless house calls like this before, but never to a lady like Mrs. Ellen Griffin Dunne of 528 North Crescent Drive. He took in the wheelchair, the collection of glass hippos lining the shelves of an overstuffed bookcase, a bowl of rosebuds floating in water, and a black cat lying protectively on her lap, both waiting for the detective to get to the reason for his visit. The closest murder had ever come to this house was in the pages of the Georges Simenon novel the detective clocked on Mrs. Dunne's bedside table.

Detective Johnston gently informed my mother that her daughter had been strangled by a man named John Sweeney. At this moment Dominique Dunne was still alive, though she had been placed on life support at Cedars-Sinai hospital. Glancing once more at Mom's wheelchair, the detective asked if there was anyone she'd like to call.

My father was the first and only person who came to mind. She reached for the phone but it fell to the floor, scaring the cat off her

lap. Her hands trembled so much she fumbled the numbers on the rotary dial. She gave up and handed the phone to the detective and told him Dad's number in New York City.

"Thank you," she said when he handed it back. "Nick, I'm here with a homicide detective named...I'm sorry, I forgot your name..."

"Detective Harold Johnston. Would you like me to speak to him?"

"Yes, please. Thank you."

That's another thing Johnston noticed about my mother that was unusual in his line of work: even when told that her daughter was on life support, she was unfailingly polite.

After delivering the news to my father, he handed her back the phone.

"Nick," she said, "I need you."

"I'll be on the next plane."

After they hung up, Dad's next call was to me at my apartment, three blocks from his.

"I can't tell if I'm dreaming now or what," he said after relaying his conversation with Johnston.

I'd had two hours of sleep and the taste of cocaine still lingered in the back of my throat, so it took a moment to focus.

"Wait...did you say *homicide* detective?" I asked, bolting out of bed.

"Griffin, get over here now. I need you."

I was twenty-seven years old but never felt more like a lost little boy.

Part One

One

My mother was the only child of a cattle rancher. Her father's thirty-thousand-acre ranch was called the Yerba Buena, situated in Nogales, Arizona, a border town just north of Sonora. Tom Griffin chose to raise Santa Gertrudis cattle, a risky venture for a city slicker from Chicago, but at last he'd fulfilled his dream to return to Arizona's high desert, where as a child he was sent to cure his weak lungs.

Tom was born into a socially prominent family that had made its fortune in the Griffin Wheel Company, which manufactured wheels for all the Pullman train cars that crossed America. His uncles were playboys and philanderers whose shenanigans often found their way into the gossip columns of the Chicago dailies. In the mid-1920s, my great-great-uncle George Griffin died of a heart attack while in bed with his mistress aboard his yacht off the coast of Palm Beach, Florida. The mistress was Rose Davies, sister of the movie star Marion Davies, who happened to be the mistress of the publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst, so elaborate measures were taken to prevent a national scandal. Ms. Davies was snuck ashore in the dead of night and caught the next sleeper car to Los Angeles, with actual Griffin wheels whirling beneath her berth. Meanwhile, George Griffin's steadfast crew dressed him in pajamas, loaded him onto a tender, and checked his corpse into the Breakers Hotel. After tucking him in, the vice president of the Griffin Wheel Company solemnly called George's wife to say that her husband had just died peacefully in his sleep.

His wife, my great-great-aunt Helen Prindeville Griffin was no stranger to wealth, having been a doyenne of Washington, DC, society who summered in Newport, Rhode Island. At the moment when Mrs. Griffin had been notified of her husband's death, she was in bed with her lover at the Hotel del Coronado in California, and took the news that she was a widow rather well. She untwined herself from the arms of Admiral Paul Henry Bastedo who served under Secretary of the Navy Franklin Roosevelt, and proposed they get married in the morning so he could be her date at her late husband's funeral. To the tabloids' delight, the newlyweds took Helen Prindeville Griffin Bastedo's private railway car to Lake Forest, Illinois, to attend the service. The act so outraged the Griffin family that they used their juice with Union Pacific to divert the train and the unlucky passengers coupled to Helen's private car. The train choo-chooed deep into Wisconsin, denying the newlyweds their grand entrance to the funeral. The family were less successful trying to have Helen cut from George Griffin's will, and she inherited every cent of his enormous fortune.

Scandal visited the next generation of Griffins a decade later, on the day of Tom's wedding to a woman from an equally prominent family. Approaching the church in the back of a limousine, he watched the crowd of guests and photographers awaiting his arrival and told the chauffeur to keep driving, all the way to Chicago Union Station. Once there—still in top hat and tails—he boarded a Pullman car (on Griffin wheels) and headed westward to begin his new life as a rancher in Nogales.



AS KIDS, WE LOVED WHEN MOM TOOK US TO NOGALES. MY YOUNGER BROTHER AND sister and I used to cross the border into Mexico on foot with a pack of cousins, as easily as going through a subway turnstile. We rambled up a hill to reach a restaurant called La Roca, set on top of

a large rock. At the bottom of the rock, a cave, once a prison, used to shelter a cantina called La Caverna. La Roca was built above only when La Caverna burned down under suspicious circumstances. Tom Griffin was long dead by then and was spared the demise of his favorite haunt, where he famously sat at his usual table, with a parrot on his shoulder who'd bite anyone who got too close. As much as he tried, he never mastered Spanish as well as his parrot, but he made up colorful words that sounded like the language, and locals always got the gist.

One of my grandfather's favorite requests was for the mariachis to play "El ternero perdido," or "The Lost Calf." The song required the alto trumpeter to go outside the bar and way down the block, to toot his horn as the lost calf. A chorus of mariachis sang as the worried cows calling out for their lost calf, and then there was a solo, presumably the mother of the calf, who pleaded, "Oh where, oh where is my little lost calf?" The tension would build, and suddenly the audience would hear the lost calf somewhere far off. His trumpet sounded like a child, crying for its mother. When the patrons of La Caverna heard the lost calf, they'd go apeshit and Tom's parrot would squawk at the top of its tiny lungs. Then the door would burst open and the alto trumpeter would wail, "I'm here, I'm here, I found you at last." Everyone in the bar, drunk on tequila and elated that the little calf had finally found its mother, would cry in relief.

On one trip to La Roca, everyone danced on top of the rock that once housed La Caverna. Mom tried to stump the mariachis, knowing the lyrics to every cancion, which impressed the band, though they were never stumped. My little sister, Dominique, started to yawn around two in the morning, and Mom took the hint and gathered us to cross back over the border. When the mariachis saw that Mom was leaving, they begged her to stay a little longer. One of our cousins said in Spanish to the musicians, "Why don't you guys come with us?"

We went back through the turnstiles into the United States, no questions asked, followed by the mariachis, who had to lift their giant guitarróns over the twirling bars. Our group marched on to my cousin Eddie Holler's house, where we were staying, just across the border.

Mom put us to bed when we got there, and somehow we managed to sleep through the ruckus downstairs. Early, but not too early, the next morning, I went downstairs for something to eat and stepped over mariachis asleep on the floor, still in sombreros, clutching their trumpets and harps.



ONE LATE NIGHT IN LOS ANGELES, IN MY EARLY TEENS, I WAS WATCHING A MOVIE ON television with my mother, as we often did back then when Alex and Dominique were asleep.

On the screen was an old Western about settlers traveling the frontier in wagon trains. They were under such constant attack from Sioux warriors that one of the homesteaders went mad, leapt from the wagon, and shrieked across the plains. His wife, not missing a beat, calmly took over the reins and snapped the horse along to keep up with the train. "That woman," my mother said to me in the glow of the television screen, "is exactly like your grandmother."

My mother, Ellen Beatriz Griffin, was given the middle name of her mother, Beatriz Sandoval. My grandmother—Gammer, as we called her—was one tough cookie. It was said that she'd been stung so many times by scorpions that she was immune to their pain.

The Sandoval family had been in Mexico for over two hundred years and were raised to consider themselves Mexicans, not Spaniards. Beatriz's grandfather, José Sandoval, owned silver mines, fishing and pearl concessions in the Sea of Cortez, and major real estate in Hermosillo and Guaymas. The Sandovals were on the wrong side of the Mexican Revolution, so as the rebels closed in to

seize their property, my relatives fled to the safety of Baja California, before eventually settling in Nogales, and in time managed to build their fortune all over again.

Beatriz's family was not without scandal either; her brother Alfredo did serious time in prison, not once but twice, for embezzling from a bank the Sandovals owned. His grandfather forgave him the first time, but after the second he demanded that Alfredo's name never be mentioned, an order Beatriz followed to the end of her life. I was perversely proud to have a jailbird in the family and tortured my grandmother with my curiosity about him, oblivious that her shame was on par with being the sister of John Wilkes Booth. My mother finally pulled me aside and told me to knock it off.

Tom Griffin met Beatriz shortly after moving to Nogales and swept her off her feet, even though she was engaged to an aristocrat from Mexico City. Tom courted and badgered her to dump her fiancé and marry him instead, and after she gave in to his charms, they soon eloped. However, her previous intended was already on an overnight train from Mexico City to Nogales for their wedding, so to be sure he didn't arrive, Beatriz sent a telegram to every stop the train would make—and there were many in those days—to inform him that the marriage was off.

PLEASE DO NOT COME. STOP read the first message he received as the train was pulling out of San Juan del Rio. **THE MARRIAGE IS OFF. STOP.** By Zacatecas he held twelve more. **I PLAN TO MARRY THOMAS GRIFFIN. STOP.** At Hermosillo, Señor Sad Sack had a neat pile of about thirty telegrams before finally taking the hint and turning back to Mexico City.

Though my mother romanticized her parents' relationship, she was a lonely child on the Yerba Buena, pained by her father's absence during World War II, when he served in the Pacific as a captain in the navy. She once told me, after one too many Pinot Grigios, that when she was a little girl, she walked into her parents' bedroom and thought her father had come home because an

officer's uniform was crumpled at the foot of the bed. Gammer shrieked in alarm as her daughter slipped out of the room, neither ever mentioning the moment except to me that night.

"Who was the officer?"

"He was an admiral."

"The Griffin gals sure had a thing for admirals. Who was he?"

The television was on as usual in her bedroom. John McCain had just been released from the Vietnamese POW camp known as the Hanoi Hilton, and his painful walk on the tarmac to his waiting family was playing on the late-night news. She pointed to McCain, the young naval pilot on the screen, who had also been raised in Arizona, and said, "That guy's father."

The draft was winding down but still in effect, and since my eligibility was fast approaching, I followed the Vietnam War closely. I knew enough to know that the future senator's father was Admiral John S. McCain, commander in chief of Pacific Command.

"You're kidding!"

The next day I brought up what she'd told me the night before and expressed my amazement.

"I never said any such thing," she insisted.

"Yes, you did, Mom."

"I don't know what you are talking about."

I knew not to pursue the subject and, like Mom and her mother, the sister of an embezzler, never mentioned the subject again.



MOM WAS SENT TO MISS PORTER'S SCHOOL FOR GIRLS IN FARMINGTON, Connecticut, a year before Jacqueline Bouvier would graduate. Miss Porter's was a proving ground for young ladies to perfect their penmanship for dinner invitations and provide a suitable résumé for future husbands out of Harvard or Yale who were bound for greater things. Its theater program gave Mom the acting bug, and after

graduating, she briefly attended the University of Arizona before heading to New York to follow her dream to be on Broadway.

Like most proper girls newly arrived to Manhattan, she began her stay at the ladies-only Barbizon Hotel, where curfew was enforced and men were not allowed beyond the lobby. (Her future sister-in-law, Joan Didion, also a native of the west, would find a room in the Barbizon a decade later to begin her life as a writer.)

Mother's olive skin and dark hair were out of step with what Broadway had in mind, so she didn't land many acting parts, though she photographed well and appeared in a few advertisements modeling designer clothes.

The longer she stayed in New York, the less likely it seemed she would ever be on Broadway or, even less likely, the cover of *Vogue*. But she loved the city, and she also loved children, so she felt being a mother would be the next best thing she'd be good at. If Ellen Griffin were to give up her ambitions and follow the trodden path of most young women in the 1950s, she wouldn't just give in to the first beau who fell in love with her. She would wait, as long as it took, for the right man, which didn't take much time after all.